

Raymond Dawson 1952 -2015



The world lost a fine man and a renowned surgeon when Ray Dawson died in December 2015 at his home in Scotland. His professional and social vision reached far beyond conventional horizons, while his courage enabled him to overcome every hurdle in the way to serving his country and mankind in general with a dedication and sensitivity that came naturally to him.

Ray's early experience in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) developed in him a deep and abiding respect for rural communities of the African wilderness. He came to love the "bush" with an intensity that never left him, even when he was thrust into its harsh realities as the fierce Zimbabwean and Namibian guerrilla wars flared soon after he gained his medical qualifications in 1975. Here, amidst the violence of those remote combat zones he found a channel for his personal compassion and budding surgical skills. A Medical Officer (later, Major) in the Rhodesian Light Infantry Battalion (seconded from the Namibian-based surgical teams of the South African National Defence Force Medical Services), he applied his rapidly growing expertise in trauma care and vascular surgery to the welfare of combatants and civilians alike.

Ray's medical training at the University of Cape Town and Groote Schuur Hospital, funded by a De Beers' scholarship, was at a time when the surgical department had achieved world recognition through the endeavours of remarkable surgeons such as Christiaan Barnard, Jannie Louw and John Terblanche. Seizing the opportunities offered by this intellectually stimulating environment, he graduated MB ChB with distinctions in surgery and forensic science, and was the top student in ophthalmology.

He undertook his surgical training at the Universities of Rhodesia, the University of Natal and the University of the Witwatersrand. In Welkom, a major centre of the South African gold mining industry he was appointed as a Senior Medical Officer in the Department of Surgery at the Ernest Oppenheimer Hospital. After he graduated with an FRCS(Edin) in 1982 he became a consultant at the Mines Benefit Society, Rand Mutual Hospital and a part-time consultant at the Hillbrow Hospital, Johannesburg.

He entered private practice at the Brenthurst, Milpark, Sunninghill and Union Hospitals, initially in partnership with Neil Wright and later in an expanded practice with Geoff Fotheringham and the author at Sandton Mediclinic and the Netcare Olivedale Hospital. At these hospitals he promoted and advanced vascular and general surgery to great effect. One of his most notable achievements was the establishment of an active vascular laboratory. Underlying his activities in

private practice was his recognition that surgeons like him were privileged to operate on their patients who he always treated with the deepest consideration and respect. ‘When you find your passion, you express your talent’, Ray was wont to say, and so it proved in his life, where, despite the heavy demands of his teaching and private practice, he contributed in many ways to the advancement of surgery.

He was actively involved in organizing and participating at local and international surgical and vascular congresses. Harnessing his enthusiasm for surgery to his curiosity and deep insight, he embarked on research projects relating to vascular surgery, not the least of which was his scholarship award from the Loewenstein Trust which enabled him to research ‘Ischaemic Colitis related to aneurysm surgery’.

His contribution to International Surgery earned him a Fellowship to the American College of Surgeons in 2003 and an Associate Membership of the South African College of Surgery in 2002. These awards and the trajectory of Ray’s surgical career resulted in many invitations to be guest lecturer at surgical congresses.

His services to the profession were extensive and profound, springing from his enthusiasm, his organisational skills and his ability to relate closely to colleagues at all levels. He was a senior member of several professional bodies and served on several South African Medical Association committees. He was president of the Vascular Association of Southern Africa (VASSA) and Vice-President of the Southern Africa Chapter of the International Society of Cardiovascular Surgery. Ray served on the executive of the Association of Surgeons of South Africa (ASSA) and an executive director of Surgicom, ASSA’s business unit. He was a key member of the bid committee of behalf of ASSA in Mexico that won the first World Congress of Surgery for South Africa.

The medical profession and his numerous friends in South Africa suffered a sad deprivation when Ray moved to Edinburgh in 2002. There, he rapidly confirmed his stature as a teacher and vascular surgeon and was appointed consultant vascular surgeon at the Lothian University Hospitals NHS Trust.

In short order, he was also appointed tutor for the Higher Surgical Skills Course at The Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh; a referee for the British Journal of Surgery; an examiner for the Intercollegiate MRCS Examinations; and chairman of the Quality Improvement Committee of the department of Vascular Surgery at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh.

In line with his mantra of not thinking of work as work and play as play - but rather as living, Ray always kept his quiet, relaxed demeanour, never losing his positive approach or his relish for life. A devoted family life with his delightful ophthalmologist wife, Joanna McGraw, his psychiatrist daughter, charming Siobhan and budding entrepreneur son, Ciaran, was always at the core of his being. He bore the burden of his prolonged terminal illness with dignity was able to spend quality time with his two young grandchildren in Cape Town. His death is a great loss to his many friends. We shall miss him and remember him forever.

Paul Cooke

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