Dr Johan van der Spuy

Dr Johan van der Spuy is considered to be the doyen of South African Trauma Surgery. He graduated MBChB from UCT in 1961 and entered general practice before specializing in general surgery and orthopaedic surgery. After qualifying in the 1975, he made an early decision to devote his career to the development of trauma surgery. It is fair to say that he was *the* South African pioneer in this vital and challenging sub-specialty. As head of the Groote Schuur Hospital trauma service from 1977 to the early 1990s, he taught, trained and mentored thousands of undergraduate students, and hundreds of registrars in all the surgical specialties. He was an outstanding teacher and was honoured with the "Distinguished Teacher's Award" from the Department of Surgery at UCT. He was also a superb and devoted clinician. His experience with and research into the management of penetrating chest injuries still holds authority today, more than 25 years after publication. After resigning from clinical work in the late 1980s, Johan was appointed to a new post at the Medical Research Council as Director of the Trauma Research Program. In this new role, he became a prominent and respected campaigner for road safety as well as for promoting the cause of trauma medicine and trauma management systems appropriate for South Africa. But we will personally remember Johan van der Spuy as a consummate gentleman of the old order and a mentor whose loyalty to his colleagues and junior staff was unfailing – as was his devotion to his patients.

David Bass (trauma surgeon and past director of the Trauma Unit at Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital) has the following memories of Johan:

"My recollections will always be of a perfect Afrikaans gentleman who treated everyone with the same courtesy and respect that he expected of them. It could be said that his example in that respect was indispensable in a small, claustrophobic space usually filled to bursting with the evil brew of blood, guts, booze and profanity. Johan floated effortlessly above all this iniquity and his solemn pride in what he did was infectious to all who trained under him. He addressed his male patients as "Meneer" – unless they gave him lip, when the address quickly changed to "Swaer", and then, before the dams finally burst, to "Boetie!". As soon as the boetie-word was uttered, all present ran for cover.

But perhaps the attribute which I remember most vividly and fondly, was his loyalty to his staff – cleaners, porters, nurses, and registrars alike. We all made mistakes from time to time, and I made my fair share of them. Johan would take you into his office, quietly point out the error, explain how to do better the next time, and that was the end of it. If an irate consultant from the wards ever tried to make an example of a trauma registrar, Johan would stop him in his tracks and tell him to mind his own business. In my own later years, that example of fairness and compassion served me very well."

John Knottenbelt (Emergency medicine consultant and past Director of the Trauma Unit at Groote Schuur Hospital) first met Johan in 1976 when he was head of the Trauma Unit at Groote Schuur Hospital. He had the following to say about Johan:

"He was without doubt the very best boss a person could have – he was welcoming, inspiring and encouraging and never failed to make one feel a valued and appreciated member of the team. He was a brilliant teacher and had formidable clinical skills which he applied with what he called; "Agricultural logic". He was always able to cut to the heart of the matter. Over the years he became a friend as well as a mentor. He was a loving husband to Gerda and the proud father of Pieter. In his last letter at Christmas he told us what joy his grandson Johan Daniel brought to his heart. Johan was a true gentleman in the best sense of the word and a man of the highest integrity."

We, his students, will always remember him fondly as our driving force to become trauma surgeons.

David Bass, Andrew Nicol, Pradeep Navsaria, Sorin Edu