

Professor Victor John Ramsay Farrell

24 May 1933 – 19 November 2017

Professor Victor Farrell was born in Johannesburg in 1933, a third generation South African of English and Irish descent. He attended Rosebank Primary School and Parktown Boys High and then Dale College, King Williamstown. He excelled academically and at sport, particularly at tennis which he enjoyed all his life.

He started his medical training aged 17 at the University of the Witwatersrand Medical School, and graduated in 1955.

After his housemanship, he left for England to study for his FRCS and to start his specialist training in Neurosurgery. He trained under Professor Valentine Logue at the National Hospital for Nervous Diseases in London, and then with Professor Walpole Lewin at Addenbrookes Hospital, Cambridge. He lived in England for the next ten years. During this time, as a bachelor fending for himself in London, he returned to South Africa and married Judy and together they went back to England to continue his career in neurosurgery.

Professor Farrell returned to South Africa in 1966 and started the new chapter of his neurosurgical life. He was appointed to the Faculty of Medicine at Wits University in the Department of Neurosurgery at The Princess Nursing Home in Hillbrow. He built up a private practice as well as establishing and heading the Department of Neurosurgery for the Chamber of Mines Specialist Hospital.

He was appointed as an examiner for the College of Medicine for the FCS (Neurosurgery) and the FCS (Surgery) and as an external examiner for the MMed examination at several South African universities.

In 1987 he was awarded a Hunterian Professorship by the Royal College of Surgeons of England. His lecture was on "Cerebral Cysticercosis", which was considered a Third World disease but was received with such interest that he was invited to deliver the lecture again at Cambridge University Medical School.

In 1991 he was elected Professor and Chief Specialist in Neurosurgery at the Johannesburg and Baragwanath hospitals, and the University of the Witwatersrand, a position he held for the next twelve years. During that time he was honoured with the Distinguished Teachers Award from the University, an award he was most honoured to receive. In 1995, he was nominated for the position of Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences but did not accept the position because of his commitment to the Department of Neurosurgery.

He is fondly remembered by the many neurosurgeons whom he trained as a thorough, highly skilled neurosurgeon with an eye for every detail in the wards and theatre. His patience knew no bounds when teaching juniors how to perform complicated procedures. He was a marvel to watch in theatre, and many junior surgeons built their careers by emulating his surgical skills. He was firm but kind, strict and liberal, uncompromising yet understanding.



He was President of the Society of Neurosurgeons of South Africa from 1992 – 1994. In 2000, he was Chairman of the Organising Committee for the Society of Neurosurgeons Millennium Congress that was held at the Mount Grace Hotel in the Magaliesburg.

Professor Farrell had great love for the bushveld, and it was in the Kruger Park and other games reserves in South Africa and Botswana that he was at his happiest and where he escaped with his family to unwind.

Eight years ago he was diagnosed with progressive incurable motor neurone disease, which left him wheelchair-bound and his neurosurgeon's hands cruelly disabled. He bore his illness with courage and dignity.

Just three months before he died, he greatly appreciated being invited by the Society of Neurosurgeons of South Africa to the 2017 annual Congress in Umhlanga Rocks, where he was honoured for his contribution to Neurosurgery in South Africa. It was the highlight of his last years.

He and Judy had a long and happy marriage lasting 56 years. They had three children, and nine grandchildren. He died at home with his loving family around him on 19 November 2017.

Dr JRB Ouma