

Emeritus Professor Jacques Charl “Kay” de Villiers

7 March 1928 – 5 June 2018

Emeritus Professor Jacques Charl “Kay” de Villiers, a much-admired and deeply respected member of our profession, polymath, historian, teacher, leader and neurosurgeon, died in Cape Town on 5 June 2018.

Born in Klerksdorp in the Western Transvaal on 7 March 1928, Kay matriculated in 1945 as a bright and engaging scholar, having already acquired his lifelong nickname. Mentorship by his favourite teacher nurtured a love for all matters historical but after being told by his guidance teacher he could do anything, he decided to study Medicine at the University of Cape Town at the insistence of a father born in Paarl. Following graduation and internship at Groote Schuur Hospital, he commenced general practice in Swellendam for 4 years before taking up a lecturer post in Anatomy in 1957 at the newly established University of Stellenbosch Medical School, as a prelude to the FRCS exam and surgical training in London in 1960.

He spoke often of his time in Swellendam, where his fascination with making a diagnosis through careful history-taking and meticulous examination flourished. Encountering a family where 5 generations had suffered from polycystic kidney disease, he started researching this condition, culminating in an MD thesis on *Clinical, Radiological and Hereditary Aspects of Polycystic Kidneys*. He later imparted his love of general practice, conveyed with such a persuasive array of amusing anecdotes to generations of medical students at UCT that many graduated firmly convinced this was a necessary precursor to a happy and successful specialist career!

Kay spent 5 invigorating years in the UK, undergoing neurosurgical training at the National Hospital for Nervous Diseases, Queen Square and Atkinson Morley’s Hospital, Wimbledon. During this time he was mentored by Mr Wylie McKissock, doyen of British neurosurgery and another source of endless anecdotes, and another South African, Mr “Ticky” Walsh. Training in neurosurgery before the advent of the CT scanner was brutal and relentless but he found time to immerse himself in history, literature and poetry, and excelled academically, winning a research fellowship to spend a year studying head injuries in the laboratory of Dr Tom Langfitt in Philadelphia.

Upon his return to South Africa in 1966, Kay was appointed as the first full-time neurosurgeon at Groote Schuur Hospital, and devoted the remainder of his career to this institution, where he built a truly world-class academic neurosurgery department. He duly followed De Villiers Hamman as Head of Department in 1972 and was honoured to be the first incumbent of the Helen and Morris Mauerberger Chair of Neurosurgery in 1976. He led Neurosurgery at UCT for 22 years during which time the clinical service moved from its first home in J Block to the New Main Building. With his close

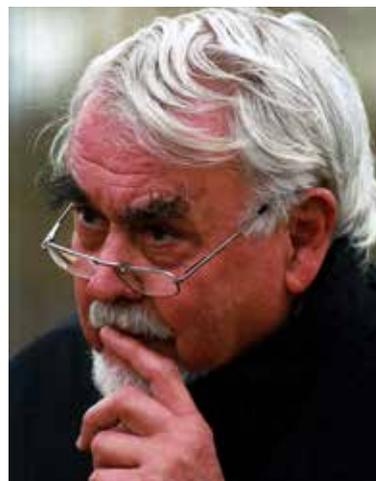
friend Roland Eastman he dreamed of one day seeing an institute for neuroscience at the University of Cape Town – which is now under construction at Groote Schuur Hospital.

While his research interests were those of any dedicated clinician, reflecting the diversity of conditions he encountered in his daily practice, he made a number of important contributions

to neurotrauma, such as his work on head injury in children, done with the young Dr Marian Jacobs. Another important contribution was rigorously defining the concept of brain death in the early days of transplant surgery, maintaining strict separation between those caring for the patient and the transplant team. Prof de Villiers was the face of Neurosurgery in South Africa, pioneering new techniques through time spent in Zurich, Charlottesville and Paris, the latter allowing him to bring back the new technique of trans-sphenoidal pituitary surgery and an appreciation of fine cognac which never waned and enlivened visits to his home.

His contributions extended beyond the hospital, making an enormous impact on medicine and higher education in South Africa. His decisive leadership found him serving as president or chair of several learned organisations including the Society of Neurosurgeons of South Africa, and is the only South African elected an Honorary President of the World Federation of Neurosurgical Societies. A highlight was his tenure as Chair of Council of the University of the Western Cape in the 1980s, where his talent for annoying the political establishment was evident, and was rewarded with an Honorary DSc in 1989.

While his love for clinical neurology knew no bounds, his over-arching passion was history. A Wellcome Foundation travelling fellowship in 1998 enabled him to research medical aspects of the Anglo-Boer War, which led to numerous publications and culminated in his magnum opus *Healers, Helpers and Hospitals: A History of Military Medicine in the Anglo-Boer War*, winner of the UCT Book Award in 2011. He was determined to bring history to life and devoted his retirement to establishing the Cape Medical Museum whose committee went on to establish the annual Kay de Villiers lecture in his honour, most recently delivered by the late Professor Bongani Mayosi..



Prof de Villiers was a polymath who could truly be called a Renaissance Man. His breadth of knowledge and depth of understanding was magisterial but never over-bearing, modulated by an impish sense of humour, especially in his later years. His memory for the patients he cared for, and the small details that made all the difference in their lives, was just breath-taking, and inspired us all to be more attentive doctors. His legendary teaching skills earned him one of the first Distinguished Teacher Awards and along the way he mentored many fine neurosurgeons, including his successor Professor Jonathan C Peter, who all made their mark yet retained a strong loyalty to the department.

Although he retired from the Chair of Neurosurgery in 1994, he continued writing and teaching for another 21 years with his second retirement in 2015 marked by a dinner attended by many of his former students and trainees. His speech that evening was a reflection on Time, and he quoted at length from the poem *Ithaka* by Cavafy, concerning Ulysses's journey home from Troy:

*When you set out for Ithaka
Ask that your way be long,
Full of adventure, full of instruction...*

Kay was privileged to share his journey with two remarkable women. His first wife, the artistic and courageous Kina (Christina, in their children) died shortly after his return from the UK in 1966. He later married Dr Jeanne Du Plessis, an anaesthetist affectionately remembered at Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital for her work at the Poisons Centre, who was a pillar of strength throughout his career at UCT. He endured once again the sadness of losing his wife when she died in 2016 and both are survived by their children Charl and Elfrida, and their families. Their memory will live on in the many colleagues who knew and admired Kay and Jeanne, and the institutions they cherished.

Graham Fieggen