

Professor Brian Leigh Warren

1950–2023

Professor Brian Warren acknowledged as a gifted teacher and inspirational mentor died in Cape Town on the 16th of January 2024 aged 73 years.

Born in East London, Brian Leigh Warren grew up and remained close to the sea and the hills of the Eastern Cape. After completing his schooling at Selborne College in East London, he obtained his MBChB with honours at the University of Cape Town in 1974. This was followed by an internship at Groote Schuur Hospital where he worked for 6 months under Professor J H Louw. As houseman and military conscript, he was an aspirant gynaecologist and joined the Tygerberg Hospital Department of Surgery at the University of Stellenbosch to gain surgical experience while awaiting a registrar post in Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Groote Schuur. He left Tygerberg for the first and only time to earn extra money as Medical Officer on a Namaqualand diamond mine and make a final decision on his career path. His decision to return to Tygerberg Surgery culminated in, his MMed (Chir) being awarded cum laude in 1984, and Fellowships of the College of Surgeons of South Africa and the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh.

Professor Warren was a longstanding and resolute presence on South African Surgical Societies and Boards. He was a founding member and later president of the South African Society of Endoscopic Surgeons, which reflected his early adoption and love for the laparoscope. At Stellenbosch he was appointed as senior lecturer in 1985 and Head of Surgical Gastroenterology in 1991. Brian was inaugurated as Professor in 1995 and appointed Head of the Division of Surgery in 2002, a position he held for 15 years. Ten of these years included the Executive Headship of the Department of Surgical Sciences. His commitment and leadership in the Division of Surgery for 30 years was steadfast and he became the talisman around whom colleagues could thrive and expect excellent advice.

As a young consultant Brian was a true general surgeon, but he gravitated towards surgery of the pancreas and biliary tract as his main interests. This was reinforced by a 3 month visit as South African Gastroenterology Society fellow to the hepatopancreaticobiliary unit at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary in 1989. When laparoscopic cholecystectomy arrived in South Africa it was a natural outcome of his biliary interest that led to the establishment of a surgical laparoscopic/endoscopic unit at Tygerberg – a unit still flourishing today. His favourite operation, however, remained an open Whipple pancreaticoduodenectomy of which he built up an impressive series and trained multiple young surgeons to perform.

His love for his family, especially his “laatlam” Lara, his love for cricket, his remarkable intelligence, broad surgical



knowledge, excellent memory, wry sense of humour, calm and respectful manner, exceptional understanding of human nature and moral clarity in challenging ethical issues will be remembered. His medicolegal work meant he could bring to academic training a unique perspective on what surgical practice is all about. But it was his teaching that had the biggest impact on the generations of doctors and specialists he helped shape.

Brian Warren was a favourite among medical students, and a reassuring and fair examiner. Registrars known for sleeping in tutorials stayed awake when he spoke – stimulated by his encyclopaedic surgical knowledge and the ease with which he could simplify, summarise and solve clinical problems. His command of his subject was an inspiration to those he taught, and surgeons trained by him quote him daily. He insisted on teaching at the bedside. The nuances of thorough history-taking and examination were taught with a visible love for surgery and compassion for patients. He had a tacit belief in his trainees, and he inspired a rigorous example of how a surgeon should think and act. The magic of Brian Warren teaching at the bedside or in the classroom is the abiding memory that most of us will hold dear. He left behind a Division where all members are respected, support each other unflinchingly, grow continuously, delight in the challenge of hard work and long hours, and, although small, come together as one cohesive unit. This is his legacy and a better one to have, hard to imagine.

To his family, Astrid, Mark and Ronnie, and Lara and Paula, our deepest condolences.

Jeanne Lubbe