

OBITUARY

Sylvia Annigje Magdalena Heijke (1955 - 2022)



Sylvia Heijke was born at the Mowbray Maternity Hospital on 25 March 1955. She was the younger daughter of Cornelia and Johannes Heijke, a dressmaker and a book-keeper, respectively. The couple had emigrated from the Netherlands in the early 1950s and taken up residence in Diep River, Cape Town. They followed advice to enrol Dutch-speaking Sylvia in the Afrikaans-medium side of Westcott Primary School. Her entry into high schooling at Bergvliet High School in 1968 required a transition to English-medium instruction, but this proved no hindrance to the academically gifted Sylvia. In 1972, she matriculated as the school's female Dux student, with an A aggregate and five distinctions.

After deciding to study medicine, she enrolled at the University of Cape Town (UCT), where she participated in Shawco clinics and played hockey. To assist with her university fees, she worked as a nurse at night and during vacations. She graduated MB ChB with honours in November 1978, obtaining a distinction in the second professional examination.

After completing her internship in surgery and medicine at Groote Schuur Hospital in 1979, she stayed on at the hospital doing 6-month stints as a senior house officer (SHO) in obstetrics and gynaecology, and then paediatrics. In 1981 she took a break and spent a year travelling in Europe before joining the Department of Anaesthesia as an SHO at St Mary's Hospital in London, where she worked for a year and passed the English primary examination in both obstetrics and gynaecology, and anaesthesia, before returning to South Africa and Groote Schuur Hospital to specialise in anaesthesia.

In April 1984 she passed the FFA (SA) examination and was awarded the Jack

Abelsohn Medal for the best candidate in the clinical section. She was then appointed to a consultant anaesthetist post in UCT and Groote Schuur Hospital Department of Anaesthesia.

In May 1989 she was given a year's absence by the hospital to widen her experience in anaesthesia as a supernumerary senior registrar in anaesthesia at the University Hospital in Leicester, UK.

On her return she was one of the first anaesthetists at Groote Schuur to utilise intraoperative transoesophageal echocardiography. Her special interests were anaesthesia for cardiothoracic and hepatobiliary surgery, including liver transplantation.

In 1997, she was appointed to one of the few principal specialist posts in the department, and began serving on the executive of the department. Her interest and expertise in IT led to her becoming the go-to person for all IT-related matters in the department. Two years later she was appointed Head of Clinical Unit for cardiothoracic anaesthesia.

Dr Heijke set, and demanded, high standards in theatre. Sloppy preparation, cutting corners, not knowing a patient's condition to the nth degree, not thinking ahead and being prepared, were all cardinal sins in her opinion, and she was never shy to voice that opinion to anyone who transgressed. Over the years, this philosophy of only accepting the very best from her trainees resulted in many hundreds of registrars becoming outstanding anaesthesiologists. Her personal insight into the rigours of nursing led to a career-long appreciation for theatre nursing staff, who recognised that beneath her gruff exterior there was a sincere, kindly concern for their personal wellbeing and professional development. As the head of cardiothoracic anaesthesia, she also demanded the best of the many cardiothoracic surgery registrars, consultants and cardiac perfusion technologists with whom she worked closely over many decades at Groote Schuur Hospital. As with her own anaesthesia staff, she was always ready to criticise suboptimal performance and always available to teach, instruct and share her vast experience. Many hundreds of patients thereby also indirectly benefited from her caring and supervising role in the cardiothoracic surgery operating theatres. In tense situations, she took a firm rein to prevent and deal with problems, and

later would forgive transgressions and never bear a long-term grudge against 'defaulters' – often relieving the tension with her good sense of humour.

During her academic career she co-authored a number of articles on subjects as wide-ranging as ischaemic mitral valve surgery, double-lumen tube placement, anaesthetic breathing systems, post-thoracotomy analgesia and paraquat poisoning. She also served as a part 1 examiner in physiology for the College of Anaesthetists of the CMSA for many years. To improve her capabilities as a part 1 tutor and examiner, she enrolled as a correspondence student for a BA degree in statistics and German with the University of South Africa (UNISA), and graduated in 2001.

She retired from the department at the end of March 2020, bringing her long association with UCT's Faculty of Health Sciences and a career of service to the patients of Groote Schuur Hospital to a close. In retirement, she had hoped to occupy herself with her wide-ranging hobbies, which included gardening, needlework, reading and long mountain walks with her dogs. Sadly, her health deteriorated progressively despite a brave battle against cancer, and she passed away on 21 September 2022.

Always a very private person, she expressed a wish not to have a formal memorial service. She is survived by her sister and her family. May she rest in peace.

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