



## IN MEMORIAM



### **J P (Freddie) van Niekerk (1924 - 2008)**

Jacobus Petrus van Niekerk – known as Freddie – was born and grew up in Grahamstown, where he matriculated at Graeme College. As a medical student he intended to become a neurosurgeon – an unusual desire as this specialty did not exist in South Africa. After qualifying MB ChB from UCT

in 1947, he served his internship at Groote Schuur Hospital (GSH) in neuropsychiatry and surgery and spent 1949 as a casualty officer.

In 1950 Freddie became the first full-time registrar in the Department of Neurosurgery that Dr H de Villiers Hamman was establishing. They developed an enduring professional association and friendship. Freddie's duties, preparing for a career in neurosurgery and studying for a higher examination in general surgery, kept him busy. He graduated ChM in 1956, the first of only two neurosurgeons to accomplish this at UCT. After having gained neurosurgical experience at Whittington Hospital in London, he was appointed as a specialist neurosurgeon at GSH. Freddie entered private practice in Cape Town, first in association with Dr Hamman and thereafter he practised on his own. During his four decades in private practice Freddie, at various times, served as a neurosurgeon on the staff of GSH, Conradie, Woodstock, Karl Bremer, Rondebosch Cottage, Somerset, False Bay and No. 2 Military hospitals. Here he taught nursing students and at GSH also medical students and neurosurgical registrars.



My first memories of Freddie was when, in 1952, I was a house surgeon to Professor J F P Erasmus, a neurosurgeon turned general surgeon, with Freddie as registrar. Freddie and I dreamt of neurosurgery in a distant future. I was fortunate to have had Freddie as my mentor; a patient instructor, he taught me the first step in neurosurgery, i.e. safely making a burr-hole! When I returned as a neurosurgeon to GSH after an absence of 14 years, Freddie was a part-time member of staff. He was kind, considerate, understanding and his loyal support in my new position meant much to me, particularly in those early days.

Freddie was soft spoken and composed and treated everyone with respect and consideration. I never saw him lose his temper or heard him say anything nasty about anyone. Always a gentle gentleman, he was good humoured and never dull. His true humility was not cultivated for display, but was a manifestation of his absolute integrity.

A remarkably skilled surgeon he had acquired speed without loss of gentleness in handling neural tissue, which was a great virtue particularly when prolonged anaesthesia was more hazardous. This made him popular with anaesthetists. Neurosurgical trainees at GSH, with whom he patiently shared his knowledge and skills, will remember him with affection and gratitude. He successfully adapted to the radical changes that occurred in neurosurgery during his lifetime. Despite his seniority he magnanimously accepted the assistance of his juniors with their progressive and newly acquired skills. One

could rely on Freddie, who remained the same no matter the circumstances. He never complained, despite his later severely restricted eyesight that forced him to live a more confined life.

Freddie married Rosemary in 1952, an event 'celebrated' by the neurosurgery nursing staff by wearing black armbands to mourn the 'loss of a good man'! He was a devoted husband, a loving father to Glynnis, Jenny and Chris, and later derived joy from his seven granddaughters. His many interests included philately, he was an acknowledged expert on wine and, particularly as his vision became impaired, he derived immense satisfaction from good music – classical and modern, and opera.

Freddie's death marks the passing of an era. His professional life spanned almost 50 years, during which his specialty changed almost beyond recognition. He was the last of the neurosurgeons who established neurosurgery in Cape Town.

I think of Freddie with a sense of loss but also with gratitude and admiration for the person he was. The words of *Ecclesiasticus* 38:3 come to mind – 'The skill of the physician (surgeon) shall lift up his head: and in the sight of great men he shall be in admiration'.

To Rosemary, Glynnis, Jenny and Chris and their children, who miss him so much, we, his colleagues, bring our thoughts about him as a small but heart-felt attempt at solace.

**Kay de Villiers**