David Stein

1932–2025

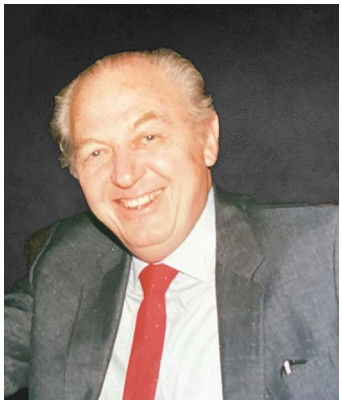
Dr David Stein, a well-known general surgeon, passed away peacefully in Cape Town on 7th April 2025. He was 93 years old. Although he had been ill for some time before his death, he remained as engaged and self-determined up until his final moments, as he had been throughout his long life.

Those who knew David and worked alongside him will remember him as a large, charismatic personality who filled any room he happened to be in. He may also have been one of the last of that generation of "big" surgeons who operated instinctively and fearlessly on any part of the human body, yet embraced later developments in diagnostic imaging and minimal access surgery.

David Stein was born in Cape Town in 1932 and spent his early years in the bustling melting-pot of District Six. His parents were both illiterate, but typical of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, ensured that their children received the best possible education. David completed his schooling at the South African College School (SACS) where he played rugby, and matriculated in 1948. He immediately enrolled for a medical degree at The University of Cape Town where he qualified MBChB in 1954. After his internship at Groote Schuur Hospital and a year at King Edward VIII Hospital in Durban, he completed his post-graduate training in the United Kingdom where he wrote and obtained the FRCS in 1959. He was awarded the FACS in 1978.

On returning to Cape Town, David initially worked full-time as a surgeon and lecturer at Somerset Hospital. In 1964, he established himself in private practice while choosing to retain his clinical and teaching commitments at both Groote Schuur and Somerset Hospitals. For the next 40 years, he devoted himself in equal measure to his academic and state obligations, and his rapidly accumulating private work. He treated his patients with courtesy, compassion and provided detailed explanations about diagnosis and treatment to all, regardless of social status or creed. He radiated both authority and confidence, which invariably put apprehensive patients at ease. Observing him up close at the bedside, one was left in no doubt that he cared deeply about people, and that behind the booming voice and often outspoken manner was a true humanitarian. He demanded high standards from his juniors and woe betide those who fell short of the mark.

Apart from being a deft and versatile surgeon with a formidable repertoire, David was an eloquent and enthusiastic teacher of both undergraduate and postgraduate students. His grand rounds at Somerset Hospital were as entertaining as they were elucidating, and he loved to share his rich experience gained in both the private and public realm. He received a Distinguished Surgeon Award from Department of Surgery at the University of Cape Town, primarily in recognition of his devotion to teaching. David was a regular attender and contributor at clinical meetings, and was never shy to challenge so-called established wisdom or surgical orthodoxy if his own experience suggested a different path. He was a master of the one-shot aphorism, a favourite being: "You don't learn from your own mistakes; you make a point of learning from other people's mistakes".



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Despite his extensive work commitments, David's passion for academic medicine was further expressed in a number of peer-reviewed publications, including 4 published papers on amoebic colitis co-authored with his graduation-class mate, the gastroenterologist, Simmy Bank. In addition, he held office in several professional bodies including the Western Cape branch of The Association of Surgeons of South Africa.

When he decided to scale down his clinical commitments in later life, David delegated much of his patient load to the late Charl Dreyer, with whom he also enjoyed a close personal friendship. In his eighties, he developed a keen interest in medico-legal work and was readily sought out as an expert witness by plaintiffs and defendants alike. In the witness box, he delighted judges and Counsel with his common sense, clear explanations, and readiness to concede when it was appropriate to do so. Like most expert witnesses, he charged by the page for his written opinions; unlike them, his page count was unusually low, thanks to his reliance on first principles and clear objectivity.

At home, David was a devoted husband to Linda, his children, Michael, Gaby (both medical graduates), Janine, and Lisa. He and Linda travelled frequently to visit their children overseas. In his spare time, he loved woodwork, took a lively interest in communal affairs, and regularly attended symphony concerts at Cape Town City Hall. A keen student of both political and medical history, he delivered an annual lecture to undergraduate students titled "Apartheid in Medicine" in which he recounted his perspectives of the deplorable racial discrimination visited upon patients, health professionals and medical students by Apartheid legislation and policy before 1994.

It is fair to say that David Stein left a clear and unique impression on virtually everyone who encountered him, as well as on the 20th Century history of surgery in Cape Town. More than likely, that this is exactly what he set out to do.

On behalf of all who knew him, condolences are extended to Linda, Michael, Gaby, Janine and Lisa.

Dr David Bass