

Professor Jan H Louw: South Africa's paediatric surgery pioneer

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Prof. Jan Hendrik Louw (1915 - 1992) was a pioneering figure in paediatric and adult surgery in South Africa, and he left an indelible mark on teaching, training, research and academia. He excelled academically and graduated from the University of Cape Town medical school with distinction in 1938. He was appointed to the Chair of Surgery at UCT and Groote Schuur Hospital in 1955, transforming the department into a centre of excellence in clinical practice, research and education. He was instrumental in developing paediatric surgery as a distinct specialty at the newly inaugurated Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital in 1956. Subsequent groundbreaking research with Christiaan Barnard investigating congenital intestinal atresia, which involved intrauterine fetal surgery in puppies, garnered international commendation. Known as a strict disciplinarian, his insistence on clinical excellence, rigorous academic standards and ethical responsibility became the hallmarks of surgical culture at UCT, Groote Schuur Hospital and beyond. His leadership in and contributions to medical politics were substantial, and his achievements and international reputation were affirmed by honorary fellowships from 11 international surgical colleges and the prestigious Denis Browne Gold Medal from the British Association of Paediatric Surgery. His seminal tome, *In the Shadow of Table Mountain*, documented from conception the history of the Medical School at UCT. His memory endures through the countless lives he touched, the surgeons he trained, and his contributions to global surgery. He retired in 1980, leaving a towering legacy in South African and international surgery.

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The Department of Surgery at the University of Cape Town, established 105 years ago, has an enviable international reputation of excellence and is one of the jewels in the crown of the Faculty of Health Sciences. Although the embryo medical faculty had been founded in 1912 on the Hiddingh Campus in the Company Gardens in central Cape Town, initially only preclinical years were taught on site.^[1] The appointment in 1920 of the first clinical professors, C F M Saint from Newcastle upon Tyne (Surgery), E C Crichton from Dublin (Obstetrics and Gynaecology) and A W Falconer from Aberdeen (Medicine), established the first fully fledged medical faculty in sub-Saharan Africa.^[2] Providentially, these three young professorial appointees, a clinical triumvirate, proved to be remarkable individuals who brought with them an amalgam of excellence and the very best traditions of Irish, Scottish and English medical education, exactly what the nascent Medical School in Cape Town required in order to flourish, as transpired under their leadership.^[3]

Charles F M Saint led the Department of Surgery with distinction for 26 years

and provided inspired governance until his retirement in 1946.^[4,5] One of Saint's brightest protégés, Jannie Louw, a medical student during the 1930s, thrived under Saint's tutelage and influence, which left an indelible mark, directing his future academic surgical trajectory. Louw, the mentee, would excel and follow in the footsteps of his mentor and provide distinguished leadership later as Head of the Department of Surgery at UCT, Groote Schuur Hospital and Red Cross Children's War Memorial Hospital. Louw, Saint's anointed disciple, gained international recognition and distinction as a surgeon, researcher, educator, author and historian, skilled and equally adept at both paediatric and adult surgery. When Louw retired after an illustrious career in surgery, he had eclipsed Saint and left a lasting legacy with a profound impact on the lives of innumerable patients, trainees and students, as well as the national and international surgical and scientific community (Fig. 1).

Jan Hendrik Louw was born on 26 May 1915 in Middelburg in the central Karoo, the son of a schoolmaster who later became a

school inspector. He received his schooling first in Piketberg, then in Graaff-Reinet, and matriculated in 1932 at Rondebosch Boys'



Fig. 1. Prof. J H Louw.

High School in Cape Town.^[6] This was followed by 6 years at the University of Cape Town Medical School, where he graduated in 1938 with distinctions in bacteriology, medical jurisprudence, public health and psychiatry. After junior appointments in 1939 at the newly opened Groote Schuur Hospital as an intern for Profs John F Brock and Saint, he had a short spell in general practice in 1940 in Bedford in the Eastern Cape.^[6] At the outbreak of hostilities, he joined the South African Medical Corps, receiving a commission as captain, and served with the 8th army in North Africa from 1941 to 1943, escaping by sea from Tobruk when the town was besieged by Rommel's Afrika Korps.^[7]

On his return to Cape Town in 1943 he married Cathy van Breda, a nurse at Groote Schuur Hospital. Tragically, their first son died postpartum from congenital intestinal atresia, which stimulated his subsequent interest in paediatric surgery and this condition in particular. Continuing his operational duties, he was appointed as a medical officer at Wynberg Military Hospital, and after demobilisation, as a surgical registrar in Saint's surgical firm at Groote Schuur Hospital.^[8] In 1946 he enrolled in postgraduate surgical studies at UCT under the supervision of Prof. Marcus Cole-Rous, which led to a ChM degree conferred with honours for a thesis entitled 'The morphology of the main bile ducts with special reference to their musculature.'^[9]

Louw embarked on a career in private practice as a general surgeon in Cape Town, also holding posts as an assistant surgeon at Groote Schuur Hospital and a part-time lecturer at UCT. Later, in 1948, he assumed responsibility for a 28-bed paediatric surgery ward at Groote Schuur Hospital. A Nuffield Dominion postgraduate Travelling Fellowship in 1951 to England, Scotland, Sweden and Denmark allowed him to work, *inter alia*, at the Hospital for Sick Children in Great Ormond Street with Denis Browne, the father of British paediatric surgery, where he investigated the aetiology and management of intestinal atresia in neonates.^[10]

On his return to Cape Town in 1952, Louw was appointed as a full-time senior lecturer and deputy to the Professor of Surgery and started the first fully fledged paediatric surgical service in Cape Town at Groote Schuur Hospital.^[11] This marked a new phase in the development of children's surgery, which was to become his surgical first love and a major area of surgical research. In 1954 he was appointed Associate Professor of Surgery and surgeon-in-chief at Groote Schuur Hospital and New Somerset Hospital. Now established as the pre-eminent adult and paediatric surgeon, as well as a clinician, administrator and teacher of note, his appointment to the Chair of

Surgery was a natural sequel in 1955 when the incumbent, Prof. J F P Erasmus, left to take up the Chair of Neurosurgery in Pretoria.^[6]

As an inexhaustibly active and productive head of department who demanded excellence in clinical practice, clinical and basic research, and teaching, he significantly enlarged the department with independent specialties within the broader field of surgery. Ophthalmology, cardiac, orthopaedic and thoracic surgery, neurosurgery and paediatric surgery were established with full-time heads, and he stimulated, guided and assisted these newly established divisions, creating a coherent group of closely co-ordinated yet independent units.^[6] This structural innovation allowed for focused training, research, and leadership development within each specific division.

Under Louw's vigorous leadership, the Department of General Surgery flourished. He underscored the critical importance of data-driven decision-making and scientific rigour, with the result that research output, publication numbers, and contributions to surgical knowledge and advancements increased. A key element in his enduring legacy was his ability to stimulate and inspire others to high achievement. He was instrumental in establishing a competitive and sought-after surgical training programme, attracting the brightest and most proficient trainees, both locally and from abroad, many of whom would ultimately progress to assume leadership roles in South Africa and internationally. Four personal characteristics were his unlimited capacity for hard work, his total focus on patient care, which was inculcated in the registrar staff, his self-discipline in setting and achieving goals, and his support of academic staff, of whom he demanded meticulous scientific rigour and unalloyed integrity that elevated the importance of South African surgical research to an international audience.

Louw was that rare combination of a man of action and an innovative surgeon.^[12] He operated well, swiftly and dexterously. He kept a tight control over his patients, his registrars and his interns. The result was a team that functioned seamlessly and with metronomic efficiency. The man of innovation conceived ways of expanding research in the department and was a powerful driving force in the transformation of the Medical School in the late 1950s and early 1960s into an institute that, in selected areas, provided world leadership.^[12] His insistence on clinical excellence, rigorous academic standards and ethical responsibility became hallmarks of the surgical culture at Groote Schuur Hospital and beyond.

He played a major role in establishing a training programme in paediatric surgery at the newly established Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital, which opened in 1956 (Fig. 2).^[13]



Fig. 2. Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital in 1956.

He remained head of paediatric surgery at Red Cross Hospital until 1975, when he was succeeded by Prof. Sidney Cywes, who was appointed to the inaugural Charles F M Saint Chair of Paediatric Surgery (Fig. 3).^[14] The much acclaimed and novel laboratory animal research with Chris Barnard, who performed the delicate intra-uterine fetal puppy surgery in pregnant dogs, undertaken to investigate the cause of small-gut atresia, was groundbreaking.^[5] This led to a Carnegie Corporation Fellowship awarded to Louw in 1958, postgraduate study in the USA and UK in 1959, and the invitation to deliver the prestigious Moynihan Lecture at the Royal College of Surgeons in London.

Despite ever-expanding administrative responsibilities and a growing clinical burden, he found time to provide guidance and moral authority in both local and national medical politics. The Medical Association of South Africa, which he joined in 1939 and served as a member of the Cape Western Branch Council from 1958 to 1968, awarded him the Hamilton Maynard Medal in 1960 and its Silver Medal in 1966. He was President of the Branch Council in 1967, and became an Associate Founder of the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa in 1956, a member of its Council from 1962 to 1967, and its President from 1968 to 1974, the only person to serve two 3-year terms. He served the Colleges loyally and with enthusiasm, providing guidance through

difficult years by virtue of personal effort and far-sighted negotiation.

Louw's experience in administration and organisation was invaluable in surgical affairs. He was Chairman of the Association of Surgeons of South Africa, Cape Western Branch, from 1962 to 1969 and again from 1978 to 1980, President of the Surgical Research Society from 1976 to 1978, and President of the Association of Paediatric Surgeons of South Africa from 1976 to 1980 (Fig. 4).^[11,14] He served the country on a wider basis as a member of the South African Medical Research Council from 1969 to 1975 and as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Colleges of Medicine from 1974 to 1979. This service was acknowledged by the University of Witwatersrand, which awarded him an honorary MD. The decoration for meritorious service received from the State President in 1980 was a fitting tribute to him in his last year of service, as was an honorary fellowship awarded by the Colleges of Medicine and the Denis Browne Gold Medal awarded by the British Association of Paediatric Surgeons.^[11]

Although small in stature, he was indefatigable and a towering figure in global surgery. In recognition of his exceptional contributions to surgery worldwide, he was elected an honorary fellow of no less than 11 overseas surgical colleges and societies between 1967 and 1979 and a member of three further societies.^[10] He became a much sought-after visitor in surgical centres around the world, including Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong and Japan. He



Fig. 3. Profs Saint, Louw and Cywes, pioneers of paediatric surgery in South Africa. (A) Prof. Charles F M Saint, first Professor of Surgery at the University of Cape Town, 1920 - 1946. (B) Prof. J H Louw, the father of paediatric surgery, Professor of Surgery at UCT, 1955 - 1980, and Head of Surgery at Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital, 1955 - 1975. (C) Prof. Sidney Cywes, first Charles F M Saint Professor of Paediatric Surgery at UCT, 1975 - 1996.^[14]



Fig. 4. Inaugural South African Association of Paediatric Surgeons Executive Committee, 1976. Left to right: Freddie Kalk, Michael Dinner, Mike Davies, Jannie Louw (Chairman), Bob Mickel, Sidney Cywes.

delivered a raft of high-profile eponymous lectures including the 6th Rupert Downes Memorial Lecture in Melbourne in 1970 and the 2nd David Vervat Lecture in Rotterdam in 1980, which brought further global credibility to South African surgical education and research.

His career was characterised by his fidelity to principle and a dislike for posturing. His overarching surgical philosophy distilled the intricate demands of complex surgery into four cardinal principles: simplicity, expediency, precision, and rigorous standardisation of every facet in the execution of the chosen operation. His expertise both as a surgeon and a researcher had wide breadth and depth, well beyond his focus on paediatric surgery. He excelled in the full gamut of adult vascular, biliary, gastric, colonic, thyroid and parotid surgery. His career was defined not only by his technical expertise and academic achievements but also by his unwavering commitment to the principles of compassion, integrity and mentorship, driven by a profound sense of duty to his patients and profession. Tireless, with missionary zeal and a Calvinistic work ethic, he inspired generations of surgeons and nurses with the high standards of treatment of children and adults under his care. His impact transcended the confines of the surgical suite, and his greatest professional legacy, and the achievement of which he was most proud, was the accomplishments of those he trained over his years in surgery.

In an era where the demands and conduct of modern medicine have become increasingly transactional, Louw's surgical philosophy was refreshingly humanistic. He remained steadfast in his core values and the Shakespearean injunction, 'to thine own self be true'. He understood that the doctor-patient relationship was based on trust, respect and understanding. His patients knew they were in the hands of a skilled surgeon who cared deeply about their recovery. His commitment to the ethical practice of medicine and his unwavering service to others set an example that inspired future generations of healthcare professionals, ensuring that his influence would endure and continue to resonate across generations.^[10]

A strict disciplinarian, he expected all in the department to hold themselves to the highest standards of excellence in clinical, research and educational pursuits. These expectations were genuine expressions of unwavering professional responsibility to patients and a deep commitment to ensuring that all members of his department reached their full potential. This eminence was achieved with tenacity and dedication to the task at hand, self-discipline, and attention to detail. He set the benchmark with uncompromising focus on patient care. Registrars and new consultants were wary of his wrath and fearful of his displeasure when failing to meet the high clinical standards he practised and demanded. An immutable rule was the late evening telephone call from the on-duty registrar informing him of the progress and wellbeing of his postoperative patients. The late Prof. David McKenzie, then Dean of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Cape Town, aptly stated: 'If he had a fault, it was particularly in his younger days to be a little impatient with those who fell short of the high standards he set himself. Those who were victims of his criticism were in the main stimulated to greater effort and respected him for his worthy example.'^[16]

Among his many interests were family genealogy and medical history. His seminal work and monumental magnum opus, *In the Shadow of Table Mountain*, published in 1969, documented the detailed history from conception of the University of Cape Town Medical School and endures as a reflection of his belief in the importance of institutional memory and academic heritage.^[17] He retired in 1980 but continued his many interests, including writing and foreign travel. With the assistance of his longstanding and devoted secretary, Lalie Malan, he researched and published *The Louws of Louwvliet*, a book documenting the lives of his forebears who were granted land by Jan

van Riebeeck in 1660 and farmed on the banks of the Liesbeeck River near the original Groote Schuur.^[18] He was a talented pianist with an extensive repertoire and, when younger, a wily tennis player who deployed a range of cunningly deceptive drop-shots at the net. His holiday cottage at Yzerfontein on the West Coast provided a welcome respite from the bustle of work and a sanctuary where he could relax and entertain family and friends.^[10] Cathy, his staunchest supporter, predeceased him in 1991, and when he died on 7 May 1992 after a short illness he was survived by his three children, Robert, Katherine and Eleanor, and his grandchildren.

Jannie Louw's career spanned a period when surgery made the greatest progress in its history. He had vision and integrity, and his legacy of excellence, compassion and service is etched into the very fabric of surgical education in this country – an example for all to follow. In his 26 years at the helm, he built on the Saint tradition and expanded and adapted it to modern times, but also imprinted his own inimitable stamp on both paediatric and general surgery at UCT, in South Africa and globally. He taught more than 4 000 medical students, trainees and specialist surgeons during his tenure, as well as a procession of academic leaders. Such was his passion for teaching and his commitment to that noble endeavour that he continued weekly medical student bedside tutorials at Red Cross Hospital until 3 weeks before he died. His remarkable journey is a testament to the power of passion and dedication, and his memory is cherished by those who had the privilege of knowing him. His spirit lives on in the countless lives he touched, the knowledge he imparted, and the positive change he brought to the world. The words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow accurately encapsulate his life and career: 'Lives of great men all remind us, we can make our lives sublime, and, departing, leave behind us, footprints on the sands of time.'

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