

# David Thompson

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Pieter Maré

Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, Grey's Hospital, Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

David Thompson passed away on 2 July 2024. He will be remembered as an indomitable spirit by all who worked with him.

Raised in Pietermaritzburg, he was exposed to the life of an orthopaedic surgeon by his father, Mungo Thompson, who started Orthopaedic surgery at the then Edendale Hospital (now Harry Gwala Regional Hospital) in 1954. David was a keen sportsman from a young age and was awarded honours in cricket, rugby and hockey at Hilton College. At university, he represented Natal and the Western Province in hockey. As a 20-year-old, with two other medical students, he canoed the 1 000-mile length of the Orange River, only the second to achieve this feat. His love for paddling extended to later adventures with his sons to other rivers such as the Tugela, Fish, Luongwe, Drakensberg, Orange, and, more recently, the Cape Point Surfski challenge.

David Thompson's medical training started at University of Cape Town from 1967 to 1972, whereafter he returned to KwaZulu-Natal to complete his internship at Edendale Hospital in 1973. He trained as an orthopaedic surgeon at the then University of Natal (now University of KwaZulu-Natal) in the Orthopaedic department. He obtained his FRCS at Glasgow in 1978. His early career as a specialist in Durban was characterised by the need to 'learn on the job' at Addington Hospital (joint replacements), King Edward VII Hospital (trauma, cerebral palsy, polio, and bone and joint infections), and King George V Hospital (spine surgery). He emphasised how valuable the annual SAOA congress was in providing a platform for learning from international leaders such as AG Apley and especially WJW Sharrard, whom he credited for transforming the way he thought about Paediatric Orthopaedics, in addition to the national interchange of skills and knowledge. From its inception, he was a member of the South African Paediatric Orthopaedic Society.

In December 1981, he joined his brother, Peter Thompson, in a four-person private practice in Pietermaritzburg after Mungo Thompson's untimely passing. He remained involved in the state sector as a sessional specialist at Edendale and Grey's Hospital from 1982, focusing on Paediatric Orthopaedics. In July 2010, he joined the Orthopaedic department as the full-time head (Head Clinical Unit) of the Paediatric Orthopaedic unit. I was privileged to be one of the first registrars to be trained under him in this role, and I joined him as a specialist in the unit in 2012. His broad experience in training, and private and state practice, made him a balanced generalist. At the same time, he also maintained a keen academic interest in the field of Paediatric Orthopaedics, which he regarded as the 'foundation of all orthopaedic surgery'.

Over his 40-year career, he witnessed the change from specialised nonoperative treatment techniques to ever-increasing surgical solutions that promised dramatic results in the outcome of many conditions. He emphasised that one should strive to find the balance between operating 'too much' (sins of commission) and 'too little' (sins of omission). He quoted WP Blount, who said, 'One postoperative infection in a lifetime is enough to cure a surgeon of a casual attitude to open reduction'. He cautioned that when treating trauma patients, the attitude of the surgeon should be: 'operate when one must' and not 'operate if at all possible'. Another

quote he liked, attributed to Charnley, was that 'the outcome depends not so much on the method of treatment but rather on the application of the method'.

He considered the ideal orthopaedic surgeon to have developed a balanced clinical acumen and know what they can achieve in their situation. He felt the pursuit of academic orthopaedic surgery and lifelong learning was paramount and that one should recognise the difference between change, which is rapid, and advances, which are slow. He stressed that Orthopaedics was a 'long game' and that one should always consider the natural history of a disorder against the long-term outcomes of surgical intervention. His focus on the importance of diligent record keeping and the honest review of results is probably best summed up in his paraphrasing of the philosopher Santayana: 'Those that forget the past are doomed to repeat its mistakes'. An initial review of the recurrence rate after tibial osteotomy in children with Blount's disease expanded into multiple research papers on the surgical treatment of the condition. These papers culminated in his development of a novel 'transphyseal osteotomy' in a child with severe tibia vara and the 'slipped proximal tibial epiphysis'. While he frequently stated that there is 'nothing new under the sun', he regarded this procedure as his only truly original thought during his 40-year career.

Dr Thompson was a passionate orthopaedic surgeon who was keen to share this passion with colleagues, undergraduates, interns, and postgraduate students. No one who crossed his path could leave unaffected by his boundless enthusiasm. He was dedicated to teaching the facts of Orthopaedics and a system of thinking about musculoskeletal ailments. As a surgeon in theatre, he could always inspire (or mobilise) those in the team to shift the line between the 'things he could change' and 'those he couldn't' ever so slightly in favour of getting his patients the most efficient care possible. As an academic, I found his energy infectious and frequently found it difficult to keep up. He was also a keen birder and occasionally slipped some pictures of 'lifers' into orthopaedic quizzes to keep the registrars on their toes. A favourite memory is of him once sitting in the back of the morning review meeting with his binoculars to comment wisely on the X-rays being shown in the front of the room!

His legacy is his pragmatic approach to problems, sound judgement, humility, and unending quest to gain more knowledge and wisdom in treating children with musculoskeletal ailments. David was a mentor to a generation of orthopaedic surgeons in Pietermaritzburg, and while we will miss him dearly, we are proud to carry his legacy to the next generation. May his soul rest in peace. ■

