

# Professor Lethogela Meshack Ntlhe

## MBChB (Natal) FCS (SA)

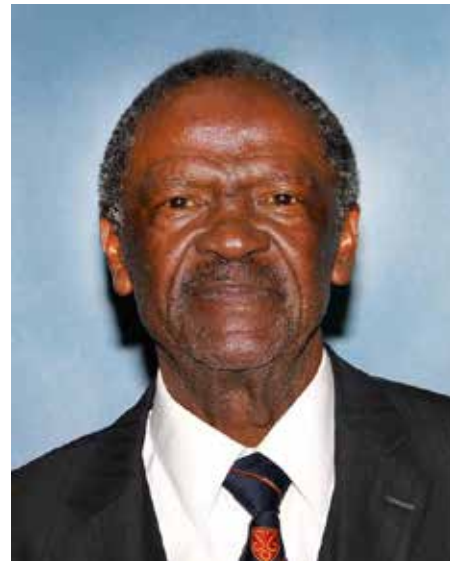
1951–2022

Professor Meshack Ntlhe, one of the last quintessential general surgeons and a founding Faculty member of the Advanced Trauma Life Support Course (ATLS) in the country, sadly died of COVID-19 complications on 8 January 2022. Meshack was born in Randfontein and matriculated from Barolong High School in Mafikeng in 1970. As one of the talented matriculants, he bypassed the preliminary year at the University of Natal Medical School and was admitted directly into the first year MBChB course in 1971. The University of Natal Black Section (UNB), a hive of student politics where Steve Biko expounded the philosophy of Black Consciousness (BC), was centred in The Allan Taylor Residence, the only black students' residence at the University. It was in this vibrant political milieu that Meshack was introduced to university life under apartheid. BC was to shape his career choices of unwavering service to his people starting with involvement in student projects to help needy local communities.

He qualified with MBChB in 1978 and joined the Bophelong Hospital in Mafikeng for his internship and remained there as a Medical Officer until 1982 when he left to start his surgical training at his alma mater, based at King Edward VIII Hospital under the leadership of Professor Lynne Baker. He qualified as a Fellow of the College of Surgeons of South Africa in 1988. When Professor Baker later assembled a team to introduce ATLS in South Africa, Meshack was at the core of this team. He visited the pre-eminent trauma surgeon Donald Trunkey's unit at Oregon to imbibe first-hand the philosophy and practice of ATLS to bring it to South Africa. He was a trauma surgeon par excellence and served in the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) Reserve Force with the rank of Colonel where he trained soldiers on Battlefield Advanced Trauma Life Support (BATLS) and Battlefield Advanced Resuscitation Techniques Skills (BARTS).

In Durban, Meshack benefited from the tutelage of Professor Luvuno, and became a skilled general surgeon. He subsequently honed his skills as vascular surgeon under Professor John Robbs. Meshack then plied his teaching and training skills at MEDUNSA from 1989 to 2009 where he established a vascular unit at Ga-Rankuwa Hospital, growing through the ranks from Senior Lecturer to Associate Professor.

In 2009, he moved to the University of Pretoria and Steve Biko Academic Hospital. He was an ever-willing workhorse, no task was ever too menial or too daunting for him. During the rejuvenation and modernisation of the Department of Surgery, he developed the new breast and endocrine unit with great distinction. When a transformation crisis threatened to collapse the vascular services at Steve



Biko Academic Hospital, he readily stepped into the breach to save the situation. He was an equally competent gastroenterology surgeon.

Meshack was a member of several surgical societies that reflected his varied surgical interests, including the Trauma Association of South Africa (TASSA), Vascular Society of South Africa (VASSA), South African Society of Endoscopic Surgeons (SASES) and Association of Surgeons of South Africa (ASSA). He served on the South African Civil Aviation Authority's Medical Committee as part of his outreach. In addition, he acted as an external examiner at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), University of Witwatersrand and Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University, and as an examiner for the College of Surgeons examinations. His publications were predictably mainly on trauma and vascular surgery. In 2012 he was recognised for advancing the reach of communities to vascular surgery services by an award from VASSA.

A committed talent developer, Meshack was a dedicated teacher and trainer, who devoted his life to teaching undergraduate medical students and training specialist registrars in surgery. In addition to teaching trauma, breast and endocrine, he critically provided general surgery enrichment lecturers and tutorials primarily targeted at struggling students. He left an indelible mark on both his students and professional colleagues alike. The combination of a dedicated teacher and trainer committed to patient care is best illustrated by his readiness to assist struggling registrars at night with difficult emergency operations. A key attribute of a good leader is the willingness to replicate oneself to

redundancy such that when one retires, there are sufficient protégés to pick up the baton. This he accomplished many times over.

Not only did he have an astute surgical mind, but he was also an accomplished sportsman and represented UNB in soccer and trialled for one of the big clubs in Durban at a time before sports clubs became professional and drew many of their players from the universities. He also played softball at UNB and was to become an ardent golf player, regularly teeing off with his golfing partners until the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic.

He is survived by his eight children, eight grandchildren and two younger brothers. Go well, my friend, and rest your weary bones. Let the legacy of your surgical achievements live on as a testimony to your selfless commitment to serve.

**Taole Mokoena**