

# Dr Stephen Paul Grobler

25 March 1958 – 18 June 2022

It is with great regret that we inform the surgical community of the untimely death of Stephen Grobler on 18 June 2022. Stephen was the prototype of a perfectionist surgeon whose national contribution to the development of medicine and surgery in general extended far beyond his outstanding reputation as a surgical gastroenterologist.

Stephen was a Bloemfontein boy through and through, attending Grey College, where he excelled at hockey and achieved distinction in seven matriculation subjects before studying medicine at the University of the Free State and graduating MBChB in 1981. Stephen was a firebrand as a student leading the lobby for equality of access for all ethnicities to medical education. His activism was initially enacted as a member of the South African Medical Students' Association (SAMSA) at his university, and subsequently on the national stage as Vice-President and President in 1980 and 1981. He hosted fact-finding visits to South Africa by the World Medical Students' Association but unwavering opposition, particularly among the traditionally Afrikaans universities to admission of non-White medical students led to his resignation from SAMSA and vilification by those members of the medical community still entrenched in apartheid.

After his internship, Stephen married a Free State lady from Smithfield, Ina Swanepoel, who has supported him through thick and thin. After military service, Stephen pursued his surgical training at the same institution and was awarded his MMed (Chir) *Cum Laude* in 1990. A firm believer in subspecialisation, he extended his repertoire as a surgeon into the colorectal sphere, pioneering the laparoscopic approach in the country. His development was further enhanced in 1990 with a 16-month period in Birmingham, UK as an honorary research fellow in the coloproctology unit led by Professor MRB Keighley. During this period, he conducted clinical and laboratory research studies on surgical techniques of restorative proctocolectomy and adaptation in the ileoanal reservoir. This was a highly productive period in Stephen's academic career with several publications in the *British Journal of Surgery and Gut*. He completed his training and registration with the HPCSA as a surgical gastroenterologist in 1994 and entered private practice in Bloemfontein. Stephen maintained his contribution to the University Department of Surgery, affiliated Bloemfontein Academic Hospitals and the Netcare-Universitas Private Hospital. This lifelong commitment was focused on the training and supervision of Medical and Surgical Gastroenterology candidates.

Stephen's development as a surgeon ran in parallel with his committee work initially with the South African Medical



Association (SAMA) on their specialist committee, and subsequently with other associations. In particular, he held several executive roles with the Association of Surgeons of South Africa, the South African Gastroenterology Society, South African Colorectal Society and the Society of Endoscopic Surgeons of which he was a proud and efficient President from 1999 to 2002. These societal roles were mainly to do with private practice and culminated with the formation of SURGICOM, where he was a founding director.

As Vice-Chair of Specialist Private Practice Committee (SPPC) of SAMA from 2014 and a leading authority on surgical coding in South Africa, Stephen greatly assisted SAMA's coding division with expert clinical opinions and unbiased authoritative feedback. His contributions to the Medical Doctors Coding Manual content and structure are an invaluable legacy to the profession.

SAMA recognised Stephen's contribution to the greater good of the medical community with his lifetime achievement award. Stephen was a pragmatic idealist whose wisdom and counsel on matters and challenges related to the medical profession in South Africa at large will be sadly missed by his colleagues and patients. His premature loss leaves a void not only in the surgical landscape but more so for Ina and his sons Nico and Charl, who we hope will dwell fondly on his many achievements while coping with their loss.

**Roelf du Toit**