

# OBITUARY

## Colette Gunst Smith, 24 January 1972 - 6 January 2022 – a true clinician-scientist with a person-centred being



Colette, warm and free-spirited, cared deeply about people. As a doctor, the contributions of which she was most proud were her advocacy on behalf of patients and her mentoring of young doctors.

Early in her career, Colette cared for increasing numbers of patients dying of AIDS in the Cape Town area. A job at

Brooklyn Medical Centre in Cape Town in 2000 introduced her to antiretroviral therapy, at a time when few South African doctors had that privilege. When her husband, Myles, took up olive farming, Colette – by then a mother – took on a medical officer post in Worcester. During this period, she completed her training as a family physician.

In response to the great need for care, Colette started clinics for patients with HIV. Together with like-minded colleagues, such as Nelis Grobbelaar, she advocated boldly and persistently for antiretrovirals to be made available for state patients in the rural Western Cape. Then, in February 2004, Colette was able to start her first patients on antiretrovirals in Worcester, ahead of the national roll-out. In order to best support her patients, she took care to understand them holistically. She modelled this throughout the Boland Overberg region as the ARV clinic mentor.

Colette was passionate about helping doctors to appreciate their patients and co-workers as multifaceted people. She could really 'see' people, and overlooked nobody. She was able to share her person-centred

approach effectively over many years as both the co-ordinator for postgraduate training in family medicine at Stellenbosch University and the family physician for the Cape Winelands District. Colette was a coach, a mentor and an encourager to many.

As an influential family physician, she breathed life into the policy on clinical governance. She was actively involved in research, especially on HIV and tuberculosis, and was a strong advocate, at provincial level, for the rural patient. While suffering greatly from a long battle with cancer, Colette used her experiences as a patient to help revise a module on Cancer Care and the Family Practitioner for Stellenbosch University.

Colette was a wife, a mother to three children, a gardener, a lover of books and animals, and a friend to many. She was a committed follower of Christ, who in her last days was still praying for the wellbeing of those around her. She will be greatly missed.

### **Natasha Blanckenberg**

*Manager Medical Services, Stellenbosch,  
South Africa*

*natasha.blanckenberg@westerncape.gov.za*