

# OBITUARY

**James Peter Byrne, 31 May 1928 - 21 April 2019**



Peter Byrne died suddenly some 12 hours after having surgery for a fractured femur sustained in a fall, a month before his 91st birthday. He was the elder of two boys born to Phyllis (née Clement) and James Thomas Byrne in Benoni. Peter went to school in Benoni and then to the University of the Witwatersrand to study medicine. As a child of 5 he had already decided that he wanted to be a doctor, and he never wavered from that choice. He became a King's Scout within the Commonwealth and was scout master in Benoni for a few years. Once he had finished school, he put himself through medical school by holding down jobs such as driving new vehicles in convoy from Port Elizabeth to Johannesburg, ramp modelling, and working as an orderly at Boksburg-Benoni Hospital.

During his internship at Grey's Hospital in Pietermaritzburg, Peter returned to the East Rand in 1953, where he married his childhood sweetheart, Beryl Eleanor O'Callaghan, and they both returned to Pietermaritzburg. Peter was one of the first intake of doctors at the newly opened Edendale Hospital outside Pietermaritzburg, where he stayed on to do an extra year. He completed his Diploma in Obstetrics in 1958. Peter then settled into general practice, initially in Benoni and then in Kempton

Park, where he spent the rest of his working life. Thirty-three of these years were spent in partnership with Dr Willie Trichaardt, one of his closest friends. During the apartheid years, he treated the disenfranchised people who came to him *pro bono* and was often 'a person of interest' to the police because he did not discriminate in his treatment and support of his patients. When he and Willie retired, their consulting rooms were demolished to make way for part of the Arwyp Medical Centre in the town. Even then, his love of medicine had him working as a permanent locum in another practice in the town until the age of 86, when he reluctantly retired properly due to advancing age and ill health.

Peter's practice was a typical 'old school' general practice, where involvement in all branches of medicine was the norm, and house calls at all hours of the day and night were a regular occurrence. To him it was a vocation to which he dedicated himself, heart and soul. He was district surgeon in the Boksburg-Benoni area for many years and did a large number of postmortems during that time. He also did a monthly medical duty at the Germiston race course on a Saturday afternoon for very many years. With the advent of the Isabella Nursing Home in Kempton Park, and the increase in obstetric work and some surgery, life became very busy. He both operated and gave anaesthetics on an almost daily basis, and delivered hundreds, if not thousands, of babies over the years. Roger Federer's maternal granny was a nursing sister at the Isabella Hospital, and Peter and Beryl both remained 'Fed' fans all their lives.

Before Jan Smuts Airport became O R Tambo Airport, Peter was the doctor in charge of emergency care for the airport for many years, and he would often have to rush from consulting to the airport for emergency landings or passengers in medical distress. From a young boy he had been a member of the South African Red Cross Society, and over the years worked his way up the chain of command, eventually becoming the

Commander-in-Chief of South Africa and South West Africa (now Namibia).

Peter and Beryl were blessed with three beautiful daughters, and as they progressed through primary and then secondary school, Peter was on the school boards of Kempton Park Primary (where he was chairman for 15 years from 1958) and Edenvale High. He was instrumental in getting Kempton Park High opened in 1966, and he served as chairman there for more than 30 years, seeing it evolve into Sir Pierre van Ryneveld High. He remained chairman of the school committee long after his children had left school. He was also involved with the old Transvaal Education Board. Education was of vital importance to him. Once he had left the school committees, he became involved in the Children's Crèche and Care Home at the Kempton Park Methodist Church.

In 1985, Peter received the Kempton Park Rotary Community Service Award. Sir Pierre van Ryneveld High School acknowledged his dedication and invaluable service to education in the town with a citation, and named a committee room at the school in his honour. In 2009, he was thrilled when he received the Wits award for outstanding service to the community from his alma mater.

Peter loved travelling, and his annual holidays would be spent with Beryl, discovering another part of the world, or enjoying the quiet of the Kruger National Park. On the sporting front, he was an excellent tennis player in his youth, progressing to badminton and then golf, when time allowed. Once he had retired, he enjoyed community bowls for a while.

Peter was survived by his wife Beryl, who died three months after him, two daughters, his daughter Diane having predeceased him, six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

He was a man of the highest integrity, a mentor to many, dedicated, humble and loving, and is sorely missed.

**Claire Wilkinson**

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