

Obituary: Dr Stephanus Vermaak “Steph” Potgieter



Steph Potgieter was born on 22 September 1928 and passed away on 9 April 2012. He studied medicine at the University of Pretoria, where he received his MBChB in 1951. After internship in Bloemfontein, he participated in general practice from 1952-1956 in the city. He trained in anaesthesiology at Karl Bremer Hospital from 1956-1959

and received the qualification of MMed Anaesthesiology from Stellenbosch University. He then visited several departments of anaesthesiology in Europe (Amsterdam, London and Oxford), including The Karolinska Institute in Stockholm. He attended a Royal College of Surgeons' anaesthesia course in London. On his return, he practised as an anaesthesiologist in Bloemfontein, in private practice from 1960-1985, and then as a consultant in the Department of Anaesthesiology at the University of the Free State until 1994. During his early years in practice, he was involved in groundbreaking work in surgery and in the care of patients with severe spinal deformities. He worked closely with Dr TB Enslin.

At the start of his career, Steph realised that in a small community like South Africa, it was essential to meet and share expertise in order to obtain solutions to problems. He was a lifelong member of the South African Medical Association and president and secretary of the Free State branch for many years. He arranged the first meetings for anaesthesiologists from all over the country in Bloemfontein, inviting the contacts that he made during

his overseas visits to the country. There were several of these meetings in Bloemfontein from 1962-1973. These developed into the Annual Congress of the South African Society of Anaesthesiologists (SASA). Steph was president of SASA for several terms. He published several articles on anaesthesia-related topics, but his immense interest in the history of South African medicine led to publications on the history of medicine. His curiosity about the historic practice of medicine in Bloemfontein inspired him to carry out research overseas. While returning from a trip to Scotland to source information on doctors who had practised in the Free State, the *Achille Lauro*, the ship on which he was travelling, caught fire and sank. Steph assisted many others to board a passing oil tanker.

He was renowned for his civility. He used his excellent organising abilities and outstanding human relations skills to establish a pleasant work environment for personnel at Pelonomi Hospital during the politically turbulent 1980s and early 1990s. His funeral was attended by people from all walks of life. He had wide interests outside of medicine too. Countrywide, he was known for breeding Rhodesian ridgeback dogs and was the driving force behind the local botanical society.

Steph Potgieter was known for his endless endeavours to help his fellow man. Weeks before his death, when he was already seriously ill, he still managed to take international visitors on a tour of interesting historical places in his beloved Bloemfontein. Over the years, many visitors have written that such a tour was the pinnacle of their South African visit. We will remember Steph as a man who looked you straight in the eye, stood firmly by his convictions and was always willing to humbly assist.

Johan Diedericks

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