

Professor Dennis Davey (1925 – 2023)



Dear Colleagues,

It is with great sadness and an overwhelming sense of loss that we learned of the passing of Professor Dennis Davey last Thursday, 2nd November 2022.

Professor Dennis Davey was the third Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in the Faculty of Health Sciences “then Faculty of Medicine” at UCT following on the footsteps of Professors Cuthbeth Crichton and James Louw. It is said that, and I quote, “If Cuthbeth Crichton was the great teacher and Obstetrician and James Louw the Gynaecological surgeon and innovator, there is no doubt that Dennis Davey brought to his portfolio a passion for research and science and his clinical interest in hypertension in pregnancy and post-reproductive health defined his influence in our discipline”.

Professor Dennis Davey was born in London in 1925 and obtained training at St Mary’s Hospital Medical School (London), where he was taught by amongst others, Sir Alexander Fleming who discovered penicillin. After completing his service in the National Air Force (UK), Professor Davey elected to specialise in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, but decided to first complete a PhD in *Hypertensive Disorders of Pregnancy* which was awarded in 1960. Still in 1960, he spent six months as a registrar at Groote Schuur Hospital (as part of an exchange programme) and subsequently returned to St Mary’s Hospital where he was first lecturer, and later senior lecturer under Professor Ian MacGillivray. Many within our fraternity today are well aware of the internationally acclaimed “Davey and MacGillivray Classification” for Hypertensive Disorders in Pregnancy. Professor Louw passed while Professor Davey was in Cape Town on holiday, enroute to Nigeria on a research scholarship in Ibadan to study choriocarcinoma. Following an invitation to apply, he commenced as Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at UCT in January 1965 – a position he held for 25 years until 1990.

During his tenure Professor Davey developed the concept of Sub-specialist Units. Further, he pioneered, together with Prof Wulf Utian, the world’s first Menopause Clinic and he was passionate about running this “Mature Women Clinic” at Groote Schuur Hospital until his retirement. It was under his visionary leadership that Reproductive Medicine developed and expanded with the establishment of Gynaecological Endocrinology, Recurrent Miscarriage Clinic and Advanced Infertility Treatment within the public sector. Maternal-Fetal Medicine was his particular interest and he recognised then, the value of diagnostic ultrasound and investment in appropriate equipment. Because of his vision, on the 28th September 1970, the first patient was scanned in our Department with the opening of the First Ultrasound Unit in South Africa. The Peninsula Maternal and Neonatal Service (PMNS) and

triaging of pregnant women to appropriate levels of care (from Midwife Obstetric Units (MOUs) to secondary and tertiary level services), which, along with the Obstetric Flying Squad (a Land Rover with a registrar, a midwife and two pints of blood), were key interventions responsible for favourable maternal and perinatal outcomes in the PMNS compared to other parts of the country, were established under his leadership. The legacy of the impact of these interventions on favourable maternal and perinatal outcomes within the province, in comparison to the rest of the country, still continues 'til today. It was his insightful vision and leadership that engendered the establishment of the Maternity Centre Intensive Care Unit at Groote Schuur Hospital and the Maternity Centre as a centre of excellence in Maternal-Fetal Medicine.

Professor Davey demonstrated extraordinary support and compassion to members of staff, particularly in times of difficulties or trouble. He elicited the most exceptional loyalty from his support staff and was always sensitive to their needs. While he was a strict and rigorous teacher to junior staff, those who had personal problems bear testimony to the sensitivity and confidentiality with which he assisted them – he was fair and had a keen sense of justice. He was courageous and found the apartheid system totally abhorrent. He was instrumental in ensuring the racial desegregation of wards at Groote Schuur Hospital (GSH), in fact, the first wards which were integrated at GSH were the Gynaecological Wards. At the time of Steve Biko's murder, he resigned from the then Medical Association of South Africa (MASA) and the South African Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (SASOG), illustrating the principles and strength of convictions by which he lived.

Professor Davey contributed immensely to many institutions of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in South Africa. He was President of the Planned Parenthood of South Africa, assisted to establish the Cuthbert Crichton Research Society, and served on the South African Council of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. He has published extensively on issues pertaining to Women's Health, most notably on the classification and pathophysiology of hypertensive disorders of pregnancy and the menopause. He continued to make these literary contributions almost on an annual basis until the last few years of his life.

Even in his retirement, he continued to contribute considerably to the Department by delivering his outstanding lectures, religiously attending Departmental Research Days and year-end functions, and lately, where most of us last interacted with him, at SASOG 2022's Dennis Davey Lecture in November - which he attended in person. Professor Davey has set an extraordinary example for those he has left behind – of dedication to patient care, of enthusiasm for academic excellence and of ongoing scientific inquisitiveness and rigour.


In his own words, in a Chapter entitled "*Overview of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology of the University of Cape Town – The Last 40 years or so*", published in "*The History of Obstetrics and Gynaecology in South Africa*" by Bjorn Uys, from which most of this background was obtained, Professor Dennis Davey alludes to Research and Academic Contribution. "*Research was always a problem. Clinical workload, lack of facilities, lack of funds and of staff interested in research have all contributed. Many good projects have been completed and the Department was first in the field in South Africa with many advances in O and G including cytology, ultrasound, and gynaecological endocrinology. It is only in recent years, and since the appointment of Professor van der Spuy, that research has been put on a sounder and more productive footing. Publications from the Department over the years have been somewhat lacking and it has been a major personal concern. I was, however, heartened to read in the latest survey by the RCOG that Dewhurst's Obstetrics and Gynaecology, which went to five editions and for which I wrote four chapters, is still listed as one of the most popular postgraduate textbooks. I suppose original contributions are always few and far between, but I like to think that in spite of all the difficulties the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology of the University*"

of Cape Town has kept the light of learning and scholarship alive and has made a contribution to Obstetrics and Gynaecology in South Africa”.

Professor Davey undoubtedly leaves a phenomenal gap as one of the foremost pioneers and academic leaders within the fraternity of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, within and beyond the boundaries of our country, but additionally leaves behind an outstanding and exemplary legacy of professionalism, humanity, service, scientific curiosity and research rigour to capacitate the current and future academic leadership within our discipline.

As a Department we wish to express our deepest and most heartfelt condolences to Prof Davey's family, friends and colleagues. We are in constant communication with his family and further details relating to his memorial service and funeral will soon be provided.

With warm wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mushi Matjila', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Professor Mushi Matjila