

Professor Deon Bezuidenhout



SA Heart® has lost one of its brightest stars on the global stage who was at the same time the kindest and most caring person whose untimely death left colleagues and friends deeply shocked and saddened.

Having become the highly respected Chair of the Board of SA Heart® as a basic scientist epitomises his professional journey.

Over a quarter of a century, he tirelessly argued that the phenomenal clinical evolution of cardiovascular implants will soon have reached its peak if we don't dare to leave our comfort zones. For clinicians and the device industry this would require recognition of the possibilities biology-based material science offers. For basic scientists it would mean stepping down from their ivory towers to fully comprehend the clinical challenges associated with prosthetic implants. The lead-theme of his career was therefore to jointly understand what it takes to fully integrate implants into the patient's cardiovascular system, fulfilling more than just a mechanical replacement function. Functional tissue regeneration in cardiovascular prostheses has been a global focus point and Deon Bezuidenhout has been a highly respected driver of this international effort. Yet his most visionary foresight was the realisation that regenerative medicine is not a level of sophistication reserved for rich countries, but a *sine qua non* for the young patients living under the low social-economic circumstances of poor countries.

As a polymer scientist, he brought a cutting-edge knowledge to University of Cape Town (UCT), long before others realised the centrality of this expertise in any tissue-regeneration programme. From the beginning, he utilised modern synthetic materials for building scaffolds of vascular grafts and heart valves that allowed the incorporation of biological signals. The goal of fine-tuning these signals with his colleagues in the Cardiovascular Research Unit and across the world was to stimulate the regrowth of functional tissue rather than experience scarring and degeneration - the inevitable fate of contemporary implants. While his most ambitious vision was to eventually replace bio-prosthetic leaflets with polymeric ones – a vision he realised

when co-founding a UCT start-up company developing a polymeric trans-catheter valve for low- to middle-income countries – he used his understanding of chemistry to significantly improve the longevity of tissue valves through sophisticated cross-link reactions to bridge the decades he foresaw it will take for a disruptive technology like polymer heart valves to reach the patients.

It will be difficult to find an expert anywhere in the world with Deon's depth of knowledge at this interface of cardiovascular medicine, cutting-edge laboratory science and medical device engineering. Despite his unparalleled kindness and unassuming modesty the milestones of his experience follow an impressive script. Embedded in the Chris Barnard Department of Cardiothoracic Surgery, he developed an intense interactive relationship with surgeons and cardiologists. He conveyed the fascination of his research focus so convincingly that he soon became a favourite supervisor of the clinician's postgraduate degrees, from MMed to PhD theses. As leader of the bio-materials group back in the 1990s he developed a deep personal relationship with the major American cardiovascular device corporation that had undertaken to fund the research unit. His countless trips to the United States helped him become an expert in writing up and filing ideas, not only leading to an impressive publication record but also to almost 100 patents under UCT's banner – an experience that was uniquely helpful for co-founding a University start-up company or for guiding his students towards his ideal of a meaningful translation of laboratory research towards something that eventually benefits patients.

Many of the fruits of these 25 years of continual growth towards the towering figure he had become in the cardiovascular field remained unharvested at the time when he unexpectedly left us far too early on 16 April 2023, at the age of 57, during a stay in Berlin. Yet most of what he initiated will see the light of the day as Deon's caring sense of responsibility towards his fellow human beings left behind a close community that will continue along his path with passion. The loss of his trademark laughter and his caring respect for his fellow human beings will, however, leave a big void. SA Heart® will feel this at the forefront.

Peter Zilla

Dr David Gillmer

Dr David Gillmer died tragically on 23 May, leaving a gaping hole in the KwaZulu-Natal cardiology community, of which he had been a leading member for over 40 years. Born in the Eastern Cape, educated at Grey College and subsequently the University of the Witwatersrand, David came to Durban as a young cardiologist in the late 1970s to take up an academic consultant position.

He remained an active and influential member of the academic teaching unit at Wentworth Hospital, affiliated to what was then known as the University of Natal Medical School. It was there that he honed his considerable skills as an interventional cardiologist. He was the first cardiologist in KwaZulu-Natal to perform a coronary interventional procedure and pioneered the technique of transvenous pacing with which we, as cardiologists, are now so familiar.

Subsequently, he went into private cardiology practice where he built a formidable reputation. The outpouring of grief at his passing, from vast numbers of his patients, from medical colleagues, nursing and other staff and from his friends, is testimony to the esteem with which he was held. As a professional colleague of David's since 1982, I can testify to the generosity he showed to younger or less experienced colleagues when they needed guidance or assistance, particularly with complex procedures or decision making.

Any tribute would be incomplete without reference to his other interests. David kept exceptionally fit, with a regular beachfront morning swim with friends and, of course, was a formidable paddler. He had a strong competitive streak, regularly winning or featuring prominently in the places in high profile paddling events. In the last few years, he had participated in the Cape-to-Rio yacht race, yet another extraordinary physical achievement and, yet again, testimony to his focus and drive. Precisely the traits which made him such a great cardiologist.

He was also a voracious reader who devoured novels, not infrequently recommending one or other recent book if he deemed it worthwhile. And, of course, he loved rock n' roll to which many of us who saw him on the dance floor at conferences can testify! He pioneered the year-end staff party, initially at Wentworth Hospital, and subsequently at the various private institutions with which he was associated. His love for, and generosity towards, the nursing staff with whom he worked knew no bounds and he was enormously appreciated for it.

He leaves behind his wife, Michele, his children, Justin and Melissa, their partners and his grandchildren. Lastly, he had one other great love, namely Bob Dylan, about whom David knew almost everything there was to know. It therefore seems appropriate to end this brief tribute with the words of the great man himself, "May God bless and keep you always".

Rob Dyer



IN MEMORIAM

We remember and celebrate the life and good work of esteemed members of our cardiovascular community who have passed away in recent times.

We thank you and your families for the commitment and sacrifice you have made to patient care in our country.

Thank you

