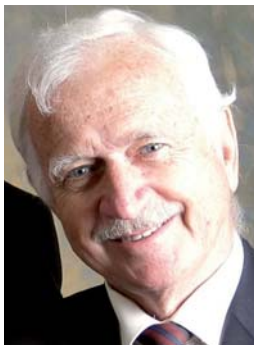
OBITUARY



Hellmuth Friederich Heyderhoff Weich
19/01/1937 – 14/4/2007

Hellmuth Weich has left a rich legacy, not only to his family, his wife Lida and their six children, but also his community, his patients, the hospitals he worked in, and in particular the students he taught.

Hellmuth sometimes referred to the Karoo town of Douglas as the town of his youth, but in fact he was born in Cape Town on the 19th of January 1937. His affinity for his Karoo roots reflects the journey dictated by his father's appointments as teacher and headmaster. A major portion of his high school career was spent in Wolseley, after which they moved to Douglas, where he matriculated. The youthfull Hellmuth Weich then moved to Stellenbosch where he obtained his degrees in engineering, including a masters degree. He then practised engineering for a number of years, first in Stellenbosch and then in Pretoria before altering course to a career in medicine. What brought about this change of heart is not clear, but it did coincide with the time that he met up with Lida van Wyk, a young social worker. They were married on the 14th of July 1962. Could it be that the soft touch of a woman was needed to reveal Hellmuth's true calling? His first year as a medical student at Pretoria University was completed without attending any classes, but thereafter he immersed himself in his medical studies with total dedication, culminating not only in a medical degree, but also specialization as a physician and cardiologist at Stellenbosch University. The history of Hellmuth's training as a cardiologist mirrors the early history of the cardiac unit at Tygerberg Hospital. Following completion of his medical degree in Pretoria, he joined the staff of Karl Bremer Hospital where he undertook his training as registrar in internal medicine under the guidance of Professor Andries Brink (1970-1972). He commenced his training as a cardiologist in 1973, the year that the teaching hospital of the Faculty of Medicine of Stellenbosch University moved from Karl Bremer Hospital to Tygerberg Hospital. The move did not happen overnight, and he later entertained many a student and young colleague with recollections of several nerve-racking (and humorous) moments when transporting patients in the Toyota combi which coupled the rudimentary heart unit in Tygerberg Hospital to the heart surgery facility, initially still situated in Karl Bremer Hospital.

Gradually the personnel and infrastructure were established in Tygerberg Hospital and the unit became synonymous with service excellence in the field of cardiology. It was his continual striving for excellence that led to the Weich family's departure in 1975 to the USA where Hellmuth furthered his training at Johns Hopkins Hospital under the supervision of Dick Ross. Shortly after his return in 1976 he obtained his doctoral degree in cardiology. His appointment as head of the cardiac unit of Tygerberg Hospital in 1979 and as Professor in cardiology at Stellenbosch University in 1981 led to an era stretching over 17 years and making the Weich name synonymous with the cardiac unit at Tygerberg Hospital.

During his term, Hellmuth Weich directed several initiatives, which enhanced cardiology from the firm foundation laid by his predecessor, Professor Brink: the installation of modern equipment for cardiac care; the initiation of

excercise classes and information brochures to assist patients recovering from a major heart attack; the establishment of a healthy Cardiology Research Fund; and the improvement of the coronary care unit with the aid of sponsors are some of many initiatives directed by Helmuth Weich to reverse the spirit of pessimism that was prevalent at the time, due to the delapidation of the building and equipment. The establishment of the infrastructure to perform coronary angioplasty resulted in Professor Weich performing the first procedure in South Africa in the cardiac unit at Tygerberg Hospital. This historical event was fully described in a special edition of the South African Medical Journal in 1984. Hellmuth Weich not only made his mark at Tygerberg Hospital, but he also had a huge impact on the profession at a national level. He served two terms as President of the Cardiac Society of Southern Africa, today known as the South African Heart Association.

His retirement from Stellenbosch University and Tygerberg Hospital in 1996 was not the end of his professional career. Despite being diagnosed with a life-threatening renal tumor in that same year, he continued to practise in the private sector and diligently continued to assist in a weekly session at Tygerberg Hospital, where students and patients continued to benefit from his broad knowledge and rich experience. Outside of his profession he remained equally acitve and the community work that he performed at Huis Horizon in Stellenbosch over many years speaks volumes of the character of this man.

His greatest legacy, however, was the gift he gave as mentor to his students, both undergraduate and postgraduate. They were his passion and many a student recalls with fondness and appreciation his tuition on ward rounds and his friendly companionship outside of the workplace. His Boland accent and the characteristic rolling of his r's (a legacy from his mother, a lady Visser from Citrusdal) added to Hellmuth Weich's ability to gain the rapt attention of his audience and etched his description of cardiac thrills into the memory of his pupils. The thrill of his voice is now quiet, but the legacy lives on.

Anton Doubell

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Hellmuth Weich laat 'n ryk nalatenskap agter, nie alleen aan sy familie, sy vrou Lida en hul ses kinders nie, maar ook aan die gemeenskap waarvan hy deel was, die pasiënte wat hy versorg het, die hospitale waar hy gewerk het en veral ook die studente wat hy opgelei het.

Hellmuth het soms na homself verwys as 'n boerklong van Douglas, maar hy is op 19 Januarie 1937 gebore in Kaapstad. Sy pa was onderwyser en as skoolhoof het hy sy gesin na Wolseley geneem waar Hellmuth die grootste deel van sy hoërskoolloopbaan spandeer het voordat hy op Douglas gematrikuleer het. Die jong Hellmuth Weich het hom hierna as ingeneur bekwaam aan die Universiteit van Stellenbosch waar hy ook sy M.Ing. graad ontvang het. Hy het 'n aantal jare as ingeneur gepraktiseer, eers op Stellenbosch en later in Pretoria, voordat sy lewenspad na medisyne gedraai het. Wat aanleiding gegee het tot hierdie ommekeer in sy loopbaan is onseker, maar dit het plaasgevind in die tyd wat hy sy lewensmaat Lida van Wyk, 'n maatskaplike werkster, ontmoet het en met haar in die huwelik getree het op 14 Julie 1962. Kan dit wees dat die sagte hand van 'n vrou nodig was om Hellmuth te laat besef waar sy roeping lê? Sy eerste jaar as mediese student aan die Pretoria Universiteit het hy voltooi sonder om klasse by te woon, maar daarna het hy homself met oorgawe in die mediese beroep begewe en nie alleen sy mediese graad behaal nie, maar later ook gespesialiseer as internis en kardioloog aan die Universiteit van Stellenbosch. Die geskiedenis van Hellmuth Weich se opleiding as kardioloog is ineengestrengel met die vroeë geskiedenis van die harteenheid by Tygerberg Hospitaal. Na sy opleiding in Pretoria het hy hom aangesluit by die personeel van Karl Bremer Hospitaal waar hy onder die leiding van Professor Andries Brink opgelei is as kliniese assistent in interne geneeskunde (1970-1972). Sy opleiding as kardioloog het begin in 1973, die jaar waarin die opleidingshospitaal van die Universiteit van Stellenbosch verskuif het van Karl Bremer Hospitaal na Tygerberg Hospitaal. Menige student en jong kollega kan kleurryke staaltjies herroep uit daardie era wat Hellmuth Weich met hulle gedeel het, soos die hoëspoed ritte met die Toyota bussie wat as ambulans moes dien en die rudimentêre harteenheid in Tygerberg Hospitaal destyds gekoppel het aan die hart chirugie fasiliteite wat aanvanklik nog in Karl Bremer gesetel was.

Weldra het die personeel en infrastruktuur in Tygerberg Hospitaal gevestig geraak en het die eenheid sinoniem geraak met uitnemende sorg op die gebied van kardiologie. Dit is hierdie strewe na uitnemendheid wat daartoe gelei het dat Hellmuth en sy gesin in 1975 na die Johns Hopkins Hospitaal in Baltimore, VSA vertrek het om verdere opleiding in Kardiologie te ondergaan onder leiding van Dick Ross. Kort na sy terugkeer in 1976 voltooi hy sy doktorsgraad in kardiologie. Sy aanstelling as hoof van die harteenheid van Tygerberg Hospitaal in 1979 en as Professor in kardiologie aan die Universiteit van Stellenbosh in 1981 het 'n era ingelei wat oor 17 jaar gestrek het en die Weich naam sinoniem gemaak het met die harteenheid by Tygerberg Hospitaal.

Gedurende sy termyn het Hellmuth Weich verskeie inisiatiewe geloods wat die kardiologie eenheid uitgebou het van die stewige fondament deur sy voorganger Professor Andries Brink gelê: die installering van moderne kardiale sorg apperaat; die inisiëring van oefenklasse en inligtingstukke wat menige pasiënt gehelp het om weer op die been te kom na 'n groot hartaanval; die daarstel van 'n stewige Kardiologie Navorsingsfonds; en die opknapping van die koronêre sorg eenheid met die hulp van borge, is van die vele inisiatiewe wat Hellmuth Weich geloods het om die gees van pessimisme wat destyds geheers het weens die verval van die gebou en apparaat in Tygerberg Hospitaal om te keer. Die vestiging van die infrastruktuur om koronêre angioplastie uit te voer het daartoe gelei dat die eerste koronêre angioplastie in Suid-Afrika uitgevoer is deur Professor Weich in die harteenheid by Tygerberg Hospitaal. Hierdie geskiedkundige gebeurtenis is in 1984 volledig geboekstaaf in 'n spesiale uitgawe van die Suid-Afrikaanse Mediese Joernaal. Hellmuth Weich het nie alleen diep spore getrap in die harteenheid van Tygerberg Hospitaal nie, maar ook groot impak gehad op die professie op nasionale vlak. Hy was vir twee termyne President van die destydse Suider Afrikaanse Hartvereniging (Cardiac Society of Southern Africa), vandag bekend as die Suid-Afrikaanse Hartvereniging (South African Heart Association).

Sy aftrede by die Universiteit van Stellenbosch en Tygerberg Hospitaal in 1996 was nie die einde van sy professionele loopbaan nie. Ten spyte van 'n lewensdreigende niertumor wat in daardie selfde jaar nog by hom gediagnoseer is, het Hellmuth steeds voortgegaan om te praktiseer in die privaatsektor en het hy voortgegaan om pligsgetrou een dag 'n week 'n sessie te doen in Tygerberg Hospitaal waar studente en pasiënte nog vir die volgende tien jaar steeds gebaat het uit sy breë kennis en ryke ervaring. Buite sy professie het hy ewe aktief gebly en die liefdestaak wat hy vir jare uitgevoer het by Huis Horison op Stellenbosch spreek boekdele oor sy persoon en karakter.

Dit is egter as mentor vir sy studente wat Hellmuth Weich sy grootste nalatenskap gelaat het. Sy studente, beide voorgraads en nagraads, was sy passie en menige student onthou met ewe groot waardering sy onderrig op saalrondtes en sy gesellige saamkuier buite die werkplek. Die brei wat hy by sy ma ('n nooi Visser van Citrusdal) geërf het, het bygedra om menige student aan sy lippe te laat hang en het hom die vermoë gegee om 'n kardiale "trrrilling" op unieke wyse te beskryf en in te ets in die geheue van sy leerlinge. Die brei het stil geword maar die nalatenskap leef voort.

Anton Doubell