

Remembering Prof. Roelie Gräbe (7 February 1930–4 April 2022)

Roland Peter Gräbe was born in Volksrus on 7 February 1930. Roelie, as he was fondly called, grew up in the vicinity of Amersfoort and attended the local farm school where his father was the headmaster. He later moved to Springs, and completed his high school education at the Hoërskool Hugenate. He qualified as a medical doctor from the University of Pretoria in 1954, and completed his Orthopaedic training with the degree MMed(Chir) (in Orthopaedics) (Pretoria) in 1961. He then moved into private practice in Pretoria for 12 years but decided that the full-time academic environment was more challenging for him.

In 1973 he became the Head of the 'satellite' Department of Orthopaedic Surgery at the newly built Kalafong Hospital next to Atteridgeville, Pretoria. He led the National Council for the Care of Cripples (as it was known then) Travelling Fellows team to various major orthopaedic centres in Europe and the UK in 1977. In 1979 he was promoted to the overall Head of the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery of the University of Pretoria at the Academic Hospital (the then HF Verwoerd Hospital, now Steve Biko Hospital).

His special interests were the conservative management of back pain, painful conditions of feet, and especially the management of children with cerebral palsy, which are reflected in his numerous publications on these topics. After his retirement as Departmental Head in 1996, he continued in the department as a consultant, teaching the pre- and postgraduate students, until finally taking full retirement in April 2016 at the age of 86 years. In August 2002, Prof. Gräbe initiated the South African Orthopaedic Journal, and was the first Editor-in-Chief, a position he held for many years.

Probably more orthopaedic surgeons have qualified under Prof. Gräbe than under any other Professor of Orthopaedics in South Africa. He not only became a legend as a mentor in his lifetime but was also regarded as an orthopaedic father figure. In 2009 Prof. Gräbe was awarded the South African Orthopaedic Association's Educational Medal 'for his work as a leading educator'. His publications won him the SAOA Presidential Medal in 1978, 1979 and 1980.

On a more personal note, I got to know Oom Roelie (as we preferred to call him, rather than 'Professor') in 1968, in my fourth MBChB year. This was through the 'Junior Christen Geneesheers Bond' (JCGB), of which he was the patron. Over the years I had the



privilege to know him quite well, first as a medical student, then as a postgraduate, later as a colleague and even later as his doctor, when he became a patient of mine.

He was an excellent clinical teacher, a doctor with sincere compassion for his patients, and with utter integrity. Even under difficult and stressful occasions, which happen when running a large department with 'clever' and mischievous registrars, he would never raise his voice; his admonishment was gentle but very clear and unambiguous. On one occasion while he assisted me when I was a registrar, he reprimanded me to stop a nasty habit I had. But being nervous and his being my mentor watching every step and movement, I did it again out of habit. Very firmly, and using the strongest swear word I ever heard him utter, he said: 'Dêksels, Ulrich, moenie!' This was Oom Roelie.

He was an exemplary family man, a husband, father and grandfather, and insisted when he was HOD, that all the registrars should not neglect their families. We had to take our annual leave to spend quality time with our loved ones. If not, he would allocate 'compulsory leave' to those who failed to submit their leave forms.

Roelie was married to Rina (née Van Rooyen), who died in 1986 after suffering a debilitating illness, with whom he had two sons – Chris, also an orthopaedic surgeon, practising in Pretoria, following his dad as a foot and ankle surgeon, and Pieter, a Minister of Religion and professor, living in the USA.

Roelie then married Susan (née Strydom) in 1987. They have a son, Roland, an engineer, presently working in Belgium.

Our condolences to Susan and her family.

'Oom Roelie, ons almal gaan jou baie mis, en sal jou altyd onthou vir wat jy vir ons beteken het.'

Prof. Ulrich Mennen

My first contact with Prof. Gräbe was in 1978 when I did a spinal fellowship with the late Prof. George Dommissie at the Pretoria Academic Hospital. At that stage Prof. Gräbe was Head of the Department at the Kalafong Hospital which was part of the academic complex in Pretoria. His contributions to the academic discussions were of a very high standard.

He was very involved with the National Council of Cripples and the South African Orthopaedic Association. He took a group of upcoming young orthopaedic surgeons on a tour of the major orthopaedic centres in Europe and the UK. I had the privilege to be part of this group and could appreciate his masterful handling of us with fatherly care. He proved his leadership abilities when they refused to let us into Holland because of their ban against South African academic interaction. We were confined to the airport until he could make other arrangements to fly us to Liverpool to continue our tour in the UK. During the tour he joined in all our social activities and enjoyed having a beer with us.

In 1979 he was appointed as Head of the Orthopaedic Department at Pretoria Academic Hospital which he led until his retirement in 1996. He maintained excellent relations with all the other orthopaedic departments including Stellenbosch and was regularly invited as external examiner. He was a much respected and fair examiner.

During this time, he always stayed with us at home and we enjoyed his company very much. I was also warmly welcomed as a guest by him and Susan in later years.

Prof. Gräbe made a huge contribution to Orthopaedics in this country which includes his work with Cripple Care, the Orthopaedic Association and especially the South African Orthopaedic Journal, of which he was the first Editor-in-Chief.

Oom Roelie, I shall always remember you as an outstanding academic educator but, more importantly, as a very good friend.

Prof. Gert Vlok