



A tribute to Dr Willem Laubscher

- by Prof. MLS de Kock

Willem Marthinus Lötter Laubscher was born in Observatory, Cape Town, on 1 February 1929. He passed away on 19 January 2021, two weeks before his 92nd birthday.

He was nationally and internationally renowned for operating on famous politicians during the apartheid era, including Nelson Mandela and PW Botha. After his retirement in 2003, he obtained a law degree. In February 2020, "Operation Mandela" by Willem Laubscher was published. It was regarded as one of the ten best books published in South Africa in 2020.

Willem Laubscher matriculated at Maitland High in 1944. He obtained his MBChB (UCT) in 1951, did his intern year at Grey Hospital, King Williams Town, became a GP at Joubertina in the Eastern Cape and then left for Britain in 1953.

He obtained the FRCS (Edin) in 1958. He furthered his studies in Britain at the Leeds General Infirmary from 1958 until 1960. His tutors were the famous Leslie Pyrah and Fred Raper. In January 1961 Laubscher was appointed clinical assistant at Karl Bremer Hospital (KBH), Bellville. He registered as a urologist and opened a practice in Klerksdorp in 1962 – the first urologist in the Western Transvaal. He returned to Cape Town in 1967 to commence private practice at Medipark, Foreshore, later moving to Louis Leipoldt Hospital in Bellville and ended his career as urologist at Vergelegen Mediclinic, Somerset West. He took part-time appointments at KHB and Tygerberg Hospital (TBH), Woodstock and 2 Military Hospital.

I have known Willem Laubscher since 1970, when we were fifth-year medical students. Willem became snow-white grey at the age of 29 and obtained the nickname "silwer jakkals" or "silver fox". His sessions as part-time consultant at TBH were on Monday mornings. Dr Laubscher was willing to travel from Rondebosch to TBH to do a ward round at 07h15. He was an excellent teacher with vast clinical experience. This was paired with his exceptional abilities as a surgeon. One of his fortes was kidney surgery (in the era before ultrasound, CT, shockwave lithotripsy and endourology). Later he was one of the first to practise percutaneous nephrolithotomies in private practice. His other forte was paediatric urological surgery. In this respect, he also was a master and a brilliant teacher. My personal abilities regarding most of the above I learned from Willem Laubscher.

Due to Dr Laubscher, I obtained a post at Leeds General Infirmary in 1979. During a visit from him that year, it was a privilege to accompany him when looking up his old tutor, Leslie Pyrah. This connection with Leeds enabled another five newly qualified urologists from our department at TBH to spend a year at the Leeds General Infirmary. I still remember Dr Laubscher's words before I left for England: "My son, even if you don't learn a single fact, at least you will get rid of your blinkers".



Laubscher played an active role in SAMA and the South African Urological Association. He was President of the latter from 1986–1990. He delivered the first Guy de Klerk memorial lecture in 1991.

Willem Laubscher was a keen sportsman and had rugby season tickets on the main pavilion at Newlands for as long as I knew him. His membership at Kelvin Grove made his Newlands visits always extra special.

Children by his first wife Audrey, and some grandchildren became excellent swimmers, even representing South Africa. In this regard, his vision and administrative abilities enabled him to be elected as President of the Western Province Swimming Union.

Despite a few serious health setbacks in the earlier and later years of his life, he managed to overcome and recover from each. Six weeks before he passed away, he was still able to walk 5 km a day to fetch his newspaper (Die Burger) at the roadside shop at Betty's Bay. However, the fittest part of his body till the end of his lengthy journey was his sharp brain. He will be regarded, remembered and missed by his family, friends, colleagues and all who have met him with the greatest respect, appreciation and admiration.

I was honoured to make a speech of appreciation on his 75th, 80th, 85th and 90th birthdays. However, in the future, even in his absence, the 1st of February will be Willem Laubscher's Day for many of us.

He leaves his current wife, three sons, a daughter and eight grandchildren.

It is with regret that we must greet you, but well done Dr Laubscher.