



## A tribute to professor Jonathan C Peter

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### Abstract

Emeritus Professor Jonathan Clemence Peter passed away in Wynberg, Cape Town, on April 02, 2018, after an illness confronted with quiet courage and dignity. A beloved father, husband, neurosurgeon, leader, teacher, mentor and friend, he is remembered with deep respect and affection throughout the world of paediatric neurosurgery.

**Keywords** Jonathan Clemence Peter · Paediatric Neurosurgery · Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital

Born in East London in 1942, the second child of Clemence and Doris Peter, Jonathan's family relocated to Natal following the tragic death of his father while serving as an army doctor in Tobruk, North Africa. He enjoyed a distinguished school career at Maritzburg College and following matriculation in 1958, decided to follow his father's career and study Medicine at the University of Cape Town, despite showing great promise as a musician. As is so often the case in our profession, his future career was shaped by a patient he cared for—a talented young man from Cape Town who had suffered an extradural haematoma following a fall while on holiday, leading to severe brain injury as there had been no neurosurgeon available to treat him. The young medical student was appalled that such a treatable condition could have such devastating consequences. Determined to make a difference, he retained this commitment to improve the care of patients young and old throughout his career.

Following internship at Groote Schuur Hospital in 1965, Jonathan spent a year in Neurology before proceeding as a Scott-Playfair Neurosurgical Research Fellow to the Banting-Best Institute in Toronto where he spent the next 4 years. His first experience of research was with Ron Tasker, the inspirational doyen of stereotactic neurosurgery,

which included time in Paul Yakovlev's laboratory as a Visiting Toronto Fellow to Harvard University. He spoke often of the mentorship received from Tom Morley and inspired by the founding generation of paediatric neurosurgeons Don Matson in Boston and Harold Hoffman and Bruce Hendrik in Toronto, he decided to pursue a clinical career. Despite being accepted onto the prestigious Gallie surgical training course to train as a surgeon in Toronto, he chose to return to South Africa to further his career, working first in Durban (in Psychiatry, Neurology and Trauma) followed by a stint in General Practice with his lifelong friend Warwick Peacock.

Jonathan was admitted as a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in 1970, and underwent neurosurgical training from 1972 to 1976 under the guidance of Professor JC "Kay" de Villiers at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town. His interest in music had however not abated and a remark by his piano teacher Professor Laura Searle that he needed to devote 10 full years to the piano to see how good he could be led him to do just that in 1976, supported by his wife Elizabeth. After graduating with a Bachelor of Music degree in 1984, majoring in History of Music, Harmony and Counterpoint, he decided it was time to return to neurosurgery—but had to do so as a trainee once again!

Working in the paediatric neurosurgery service at Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital which had been established by Warwick Peacock in 1979, he took charge following Warwick's departure for Los Angeles in 1986. Paediatric neurosurgery was to define the rest of his career. He made important scientific contributions to the treatment of congenital disorders, spasticity, hydrocephalus and brain injury, and made many friends around the world through the International Society for Paediatric Neurosurgery (ISPN).

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Perhaps the major highlight of his career was election as the 29th president of the ISPN and he greatly enjoyed the honour of wearing the illustrious red poncho as the president at the 30th Annual Meeting in Kyoto, Japan, in 2002 (Fig. 1). He served on the editorial board of *Child's Nervous System* for 15 years and inspired a generation of paediatric neurosurgeons in Africa, including Graham Fieggen, Tony Figaji, Llewellyn Padayachy and Nico Enslin in South Africa, Kachinga Sichizya in Zambia, and John Mugamba, Peter Ssenyonga and Emmanuel Wegoye in Uganda.

Jonathan's appointment as the second incumbent of the Helen and Morris Mauerberger Chair of Neurosurgery in 1994 allowed him to build a much-admired department. He particularly encouraged the growth of sub-specialties, enabling many of his trainees to achieve international reputations in their fields. He was also able to make a major contribution to neurosurgery nationally, serving as the president of the College of Neurosurgeons (1998–2008), the Society of Neurosurgeons of SA (2000–2002) and representing Africa as 2nd Vice President in the World Federation (2005–2009).



**Fig. 1** Wearing the ISPN Presidential Poncho at the 30th Annual Meeting in Kyoto, Japan

It is a credit to his leadership of Neurosurgery at UCT that at the present time, the presidents of three major international neurosurgical societies happen also to be members of his department.

Jonathan spoke often of his respect and affection for the neurologists who shaped his early career, and this led naturally to a much warmer relationship between Neurosurgery and Neurology during the period when he and Roland Eastman were at the helm of these specialities. In no small measure, this paved the way for the Neuroscience Institute currently under construction at Groote Schuur Hospital.

Following retirement in 2007, Jonathan found great joy in remaining part of the neurosurgical service where he continued innovating—working with Tony Figaji and Francesco Sala to establish a world-class intraoperative neurophysiology service in Cape Town. He also enjoyed teaching which he continued until January this year, and remained a trusted mentor and friend to his colleagues. We were fortunate to have an opportunity to acknowledge his many contributions to teaching and training when he received a special award for *exceptional contribution to South African and international training in minimally invasive neurosurgery* at the 8th World Congress of Neuro-endoscopy hosted by Llewellyn Padayachy in Cape Town last year.

There were so many lessons we learned from Jonathan—his incredible sense of fairness, approachability, commitment to his work, excitement about innovation (who else would have brought a land surveyor into the operating theatre to develop a system for neuronavigation) but most of all joy in the success of his colleagues and trainees—true mentorship. As a neurosurgeon, he was an exemplary role model, available at any time to come to Red Cross to look at a scan and give advice, always showing his patients such care and concern and reminding us that this enthusiasm was born of having had a second chance in his career (Fig. 2).

The operating theatre forges a special bond and he imparted skills with such calmness (Fig. 3). Always supportive, encouraging and patient, perhaps his most remarkable traits were clarity of purpose, decisiveness and unbelievable consistency—great gifts in a surgical teacher. We all learnt early to trust his judgement—when to start, or when not to, and when to stop.

With an astonishing breadth of talents and a deep interest in humanity and all forms of cultural expression, Jonathan was truly a Renaissance man. Coupled with a tremendous sense of humour, a love of music, comedy and magic, he was very good company. His friends and colleagues around the world will have their own favourite memories—running, walking or more recently strolling on the green belt, or strolling down a

**Fig. 2** Neurosurgical team at Red Cross War Memorial Children’s Hospital, 1984. Jorge Lazareff, Warwick J Peacock, JC “Kay” de Villiers and Jonathan C Peter

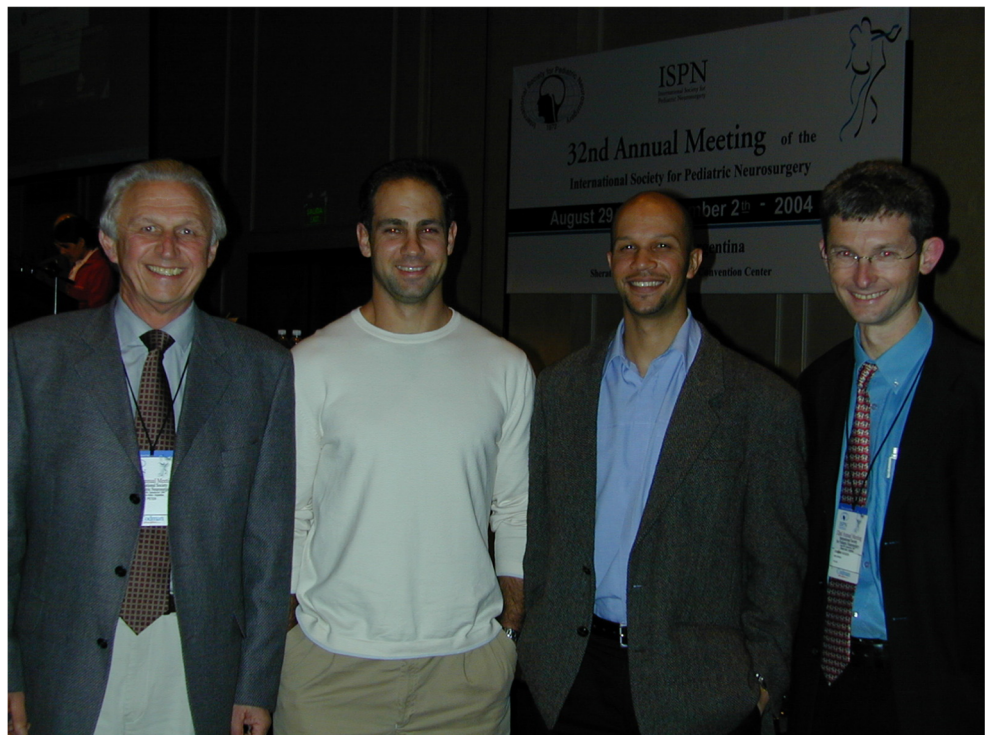


fairway before rolling in a birdie putt, watching birds—or watching cricket, exploring the bush, sharing good food and even better wine (and the occasional cigar), enjoying literature, comedy, theatre, movies, music and magic, medicine and neurosurgery, early morning radio host—no one person could

ever give a complete account of a life so richly textured as his (Fig. 4).

Loyalty to UCT runs very deep in Jonathan’s family. His children Larissa and Jonny, and their spouses Eugenio and Jo, are all alumni of UCT medical school, while grandchildren

**Fig. 3** A growing presence in international paediatric neurosurgery- Jonathan as Head of Division with Marc Coughlin, Tony Figaji and Graham Fieggen at the 32nd Annual Meeting of the ISPN, Buenos Aires, 2004.



**Fig. 4** Jonathan with Archbishop Tutu and delegates large and small at the 36th Annual Meeting of the ISPN, Cape Town 2008



**Fig. 5** The RCWMCH paediatric neurosurgery team saying farewell to Dr. Emmanuel Wegoye in January 2017, returning to Uganda after his fellowship training. Nico Enslin, Llewellyn Padayachy, Tony Figaji, Emmanuel Wegoye, Graham Fieggen and Jonathan Peter

Angelica and Monica ensure that there is now a fourth generation of this remarkable family at our medical school (Fig. 5). We extend to all of them and to Agnes our deepest sympathy at the loss of this extraordinary man.

### Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.