

# OBITUARY

## Stuart John Saunders, 28 August 1933 - 12 February 2021



Stuart Saunders led a full and active life that included serving as Professor and Head of the Department of Medicine at the University of Cape Town and Groote Schuur Hospital (1971 - 1980) and as Principal/Vice-Chancellor of UCT (1981 - 1996).

After graduating MB ChB Hons from UCT in 1953, Stuart undertook postgraduate work under Malcolm Milne at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School in London and under Kurt Isselbacher at Harvard Medical School in Boston. He was appointed to a full-time position in the UCT Department of Medicine in 1961, where his early reputation derived from innovative work in the Liver Research Group he founded. This later became the MRC/UCT Liver Research Centre that he co-directed with Ralph Kirsch and John Terblanche. His best-known work in hepatology was on exchange transfusion in acute liver failure.

Stuart served the College of Medicine of South Africa for 19 years, initially as the Honorary Registrar and finally as the Senior Vice-President (1977 - 1980). In an 80th birthday tribute to him, Tom Bothwell described him as a friendly, warm man with an ebullient, outgoing but relaxed nature who was a highly successful head of a department that he led to new heights with many subspecialty departments, each with their own research programmes.

Stuart was also an astute clinician and a mentor to aspiring physicians and researchers. His solid dependability, wise advice, loyalty, integrity, critical thinking and sense of humour set high standards that influenced many. Underlying all his work was his open-minded pursuit of clinical and scientific excellence, coupled with interests in the

welfare and advancement of students and younger colleagues, in whom he showed great interest and mentored with enthusiasm. His ability to spot students and academics with talent and ambition shaped the development of many medical careers.

The second phase of Stuart's professional life, as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, propelled him into prominence as an impressive university leader in a deeply troubled society. In this role, his integrity, principled outlook and actions were focused on opposition to apartheid, high-quality administration, and preservation of freedom of speech and university autonomy. He enlisted into senior university management positions many accomplished academics who understood the role of institutions of higher education and could interact with academic staff on mutually supportive grounds.

He was deeply dedicated to all he undertook within the frameworks of medicine and the university, to both of which he was intensely loyal. His concern for students, his abhorrence of racial discrimination, and his pursuit of fairness in a blatantly discriminatory society were inspiring qualities of an exemplary citizen who touched the lives of many in our country. The turbulent years during which he led the university and was President of the South African Institute of Race Relations (1985/6), helping to maintain a peaceful campus, are well documented in his memoirs, *Vice-Chancellor on a Tightrope* (2000).

His involvement beyond the university included serving as a trustee of several foundations and trusts. He founded the UCT Trust in the UK, which raised considerable resources for UCT. Through fund raising for the university and for higher education he strengthened the potential for universities' independence to implement high-quality education and research.

After taking mandatory retirement at the end of 1996, Stuart continued as a senior adviser to the Andrew W Mellon Foundation of New York, motivated by the idea that independent fund-raising for South African universities was essential to sustaining commitment to independent research and academic freedom. He also continued to work in the Liver Clinic at Groote Schuur Hospital, where he provided ongoing support, stimulation and perspective for younger colleagues. Throughout 2020 he remained

a regular presence at the Department of Medicine weekly COVID-19 webinars.

Stuart was a man of few words, but a man of great action. He saw through superficiality and valued sincerity. He started life humbly and rose to great prominence in his chosen field of medical research and practice, as well as within university circles. The values imparted to him by his parents ensured that despite his rise to the top echelons of medicine and academia he maintained 'the common touch' and could relate to all people, whatever their status or affiliation. He had a highly respected public image while maintaining the privacy of his life and that of his family. In brief, he was a remarkable, unforgettable, and deeply principled individual.

His varied contributions were honoured by many awards, including honorary doctorates from seven universities and one of the highest honours that can be conferred on a South African, the Order of the Baobab (Silver), bestowed by the then President of South Africa (2002).

Stuart lived comfortably in his post-retirement home after Anita's death, although socially isolated due to COVID-19 restrictions. He remained in reasonably good health until he sustained a fall that led to his final two weeks in hospital, where he received excellent care. He is survived by his children John and Jane, who provided much loving support through his final illness, and his grandchildren Emma, Ryan, Gemma, Liam and Ben, all of whom were a great source of pride and joy to him.

The online memorial page (<https://www.news.uct.ac.za/in-memoriam/stuart-saunders/-article/2021-02-25-in-memoriam-dr-stuart-saunders-tribute-video-2>) on the UCT website speaks volumes about Stuart. He will be remembered with affection and respect as a loving husband, father, grandfather and family member, a loyal friend, a distinguished physician, a devoted Vice-Chancellor who vigorously promoted higher education, academic freedom and university autonomy, and a courageously engaged citizen of his country.

**Solomon Benatar, Peter Folb,  
John Terblanche, Wendy Spearman,  
Mark Sonderup**

*University of Cape Town, South Africa  
solomon.benatar@uct.ac.za*

*Photo courtesy of the University of Cape Town.*