

OBITUARY – Peter Charles Belonje (1939 – 2019)

Peter Charles Belonje passed away on the 2nd of May 2019 at the age of 79, after a long struggle with cancer. He is survived by his wife Judy, daughters Dyan and Renee, and son Grant. We extend our heartfelt condolences to his family. Despite being ill himself, Peter chose for the past number of years to care for Judy, also ill, at their home rather than have her go into a Care Centre.

Peter Belonje was a son of the Eastern Cape: he was born in Middelburg and attended primary school there. He matriculated from Grey High School in Port Elizabeth at the young age of 16 and qualified from the Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Pretoria, in the class of 1960 as one of the youngest graduates to date. After a spell at the Veterinary Investigation Centre in Stellenbosch, Peter returned to OP to complete an MMed Vet Degree in Physiology in 1967 and followed this later with his DVSc in 1976. Peter was one of a unique group within the veterinary fraternity with three generations of veterinarians in the family qualifying from OP: his father Charles in 1936, Peter himself in 1960 and his son Grant in 1996.

As author or co-author of some 60 scientific papers, Peter's published work reflects the spectrum of his research interests. His early work looked at partus induction and the involution of the uterus. The effects of dehydration and stress on the body followed, while his later research looked at electrolyte metabolism and more specifically at the role of phosphorus and calcium related to parathyroid function and its effect on body physiology. Throughout his career Peter retained an active interest in research and his postgraduate students considered him a formidable scientist.

After completion of his MMed Vet, Peter joined the Department of Human and Animal Physiology at the University of Stellenbosch, where he remained until he was appointed Head of the Department of Physiology at the Medical School, University of Cape Town, in 1981. On appointment Peter made a number of innovative and meaningful changes to the curriculum which immediately put his stamp on the way forward. He remained in this position until his retirement in 1999. Peter had joined the Physiology Society of Southern Africa (PSSA) in 1980 and he served as President of the PSSA from 1985 to 1988.

While holding career positions essentially outside of the veterinary profession, Peter never forsook his roots and was always quick to let people know that first and foremost he was a veterinarian and that his area of expertise was physiology.

This is reflected in the prominent role Peter played within our profession throughout his lifetime. On qualifying, Peter joined the SAVA in 1961. He became a member of the Cape West Branch serving as treasurer, later secretary and ultimately Chairman from 1979 to 1982. As was his wont, Peter stamped his positive leadership style on the Branch, collating the minutes of all meetings since the Branch's inception in 1947 into a formal minutes book, ensuring that the branch knew where it had come from and where it was going to! In 1982 Peter was elected President of the SAVA for a two-year term of office. Leading by example, Peter involved many other veterinarians in the activities of Federal Council as well as the various Branches and Groups of the Association.

He saw the SAVA as a "Club for Veterinarians". To this end, together with Tubby Veary and Bill Sykes, he was responsible for establishing VetHouse as the SAVA's headquarters. He designed a new SAVA tie, had gavels made for each Branch and Group and wrote the Crede/Credo which is read at all meetings of the Association to remind us of our professional responsibility.

Peter was elected to the Veterinary Council in 1986 and because of his passion for and interest in education was appointed to the Education Committee. In 1982 he had led the visitation Committee tasked with evaluating undergraduate veterinary training at the Medical University of South Africa. On behalf of Council he also served as an inspector for physiology and physiological chemistry at OP and MEDUNSA.

Peter's signal service to the veterinary profession, in particular through his active involvement in the affairs of the SAVA at branch and national level, was recognized when he received the Boswell Award in 1996.

Peter was always one for a bit of fun. While in his final year at OP he initiated the "Belonje Report", a spoof of the infamous Kinsey Report. The eagerly awaited results were always received with much hilarity. And who of his contemporaries will ever forget his prowess on the rugby field? As a dashing wing, Peter could cover diagonally across the field at cheetah-like speed and down his unsuspecting prey just short of the try line, much to the consternation of the opponents and adulation of his team-mates.

Peter was an avid traveler and his trips took him far and wide, from the Galapagos Islands to the far reaches of our own country. He was an active Probus member and many of his South African trips were conceived and organized by him for his many Probus friends. The trips were, in true Belonje style, well planned, professionally executed and thoroughly enjoyed by all who joined him.

In the words of his son Grant, "Peter was a larger than life character who loved his career, his friends and his many students. He was an amazing man and a huge advocate of the veterinary world in South Africa". His sharp intellect, nimbleness of mind and quick wit will be missed by all.

To Judy, Dyan, Renee and Grant, may you find strength at this time.

Brough Coubrough and Gareth Bath