

# OBITUARY

**Geoffrey Falkson, 9 August 1932 - 10 January 2019**



Professor Geoffrey Falkson, born on 9 August 1932 in Pretoria, passed away on Thursday 10 January 2019. This marks the end of an era in medical oncology in South Africa.

Geoffrey received his MB ChB from the University of Pretoria in 1955. In 1956 he married his classmate Hendrika Cornelia van Dyk, and they did their internship together in Pretoria. They both successfully tackled the Michigan State Board exams at the University of Ann Arbor, USA, in 1957, and undertook postgraduate training at the Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, Michigan. They then returned to South Africa, where Geoffrey completed his training as a specialist in internal medicine. He received his MMed (Int) in 1962 and his MD (*cum laude*) in 1965, both from the University of Pretoria.

In 1964, Geoffrey was appointed as a cancer chemotherapist in the Department of Radiotherapy at the University of Pretoria (part time, as there was uncertainty whether there would be enough demand for a full-time cancer chemotherapist). In 1966 he was appointed head of the newly created independent department of 'cancer chemotherapy' by the Transvaal Provincial Administration. This department was promulgated by the Senate of the University of Pretoria as a full, independent Department of Medical Oncology in the Faculty of Medicine in November 1967.

Geoffrey dedicated more than 40 years of his academic career to cancer research,

education and patient care. He was a pioneer in the clinical implementation of new anticancer treatments, conducting clinical trials introducing many new agents including 5-fluorouracil (still the backbone of current treatments for gastrointestinal and other malignancies) and endocrine therapies (including aromatase inhibitors) in the management of breast cancer, to list only a few examples. In 1966, after reading one of Geoffrey's scientific papers, Dr James Holland approached him to collaborate and become a member of the newly formed Cancer and Leukemia Group B Co-operative Oncology Group in the USA. This collaboration led to the first cures for South African children with leukaemia. In 1970 he was invited by Dr Paul Carbone to become a member of the Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group (ECOG) in the USA and continue developing leading-edge treatments for patients with cancer.

During the next 30 years as Head of Department he made inroads into the treatment of cancer, gaining recognition both nationally and internationally and ensuring the availability of ground-breaking treatments for South Africans at both Pretoria Academic Hospital (now Steve Biko Academic Hospital) and Kalafong Hospital. The Department of Medical Oncology in Pretoria grew from strength to strength under his leadership.

Geoffrey was not only an outstanding clinician and a fatherly figure loved by all his patients, but also an astute researcher and inspirational role model who fostered research co-operation and educated the next generation of oncologists. Geoffrey and Hendre formed a formidable husband-and-wife oncology team, but despite the arduous demands of his career, Geoffrey always had time for his family, and is survived by his three children (two of whom have become oncologists), eight grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

The high quality of Geoffrey's scientific work and his meticulous attention to detail are evidenced by the multiple grants he held and awards he received. Examples include the Jaycee Young Man of the Year in 1971,

the C H Rautenbach Gold Medal in 1977, an Academic Gold Medal from the South African Academy for Arts and Science in 1983, the Christo Beyers Medal in 1983, Eminent Scientist of the Decade 1990 - 1999 from the International Research Promotion Council in 1999, and the highest award for civilians in South Africa, the Order of the Southern Cross, Gold, presented to him in 1990. He also received awards for meritorious service from ECOG 'in appreciation of dedicated service' in 1997 and from the American Association for Cancer Research 'celebrating 50 years of membership' in 2012.

His productivity is exemplified by his prolific publication record: he authored and co-authored over 750 scientific peer-reviewed articles and book chapters.

Geoffrey Falkson was truly the founding father of medical oncology in South Africa, influencing and inspiring many physicians all over the world. He was a founder member of the British Association for Cancer Research, a member of the International Association for the Study of Lung Cancer, the American Society of Clinical Oncology and the European Society of Medical Oncology, a founder member of the South Africa Lymphoma Study Group, and founder and chairman of the South African Society of Medical Oncology from its inception in 1987 until 1993.

He was a multi-talented and highly gifted person. After his retirement from medical oncology in 1999 he continued to serve as chairman of the Ethics Committee of the Pretoria Academic Hospital and the University of Pretoria. He also focused on his music, lecturing on 20th-century composers to the U3A (University of the Third Age), and his art; his oil paintings and pen sketches adorn many walls in many countries.

He will be sorely missed by the medical fraternity, both nationally and internationally. Rest in peace, Prof. G – your legacy will live on.

**Lydia Mary Dreosti**

University of Pretoria, South Africa  
[lydia.dreosti@up.ac.za](mailto:lydia.dreosti@up.ac.za)