

In Loving Memory of  
**Earle Eugene Gerard (Charles)  
Lautenbach**

*23 August 1932 - 23 June 2018*



**Funeral Service by David Potterton  
at St John's Catholic Church  
11 July 2018**

## **Eulogy by Gabi Lautenbach to her father, Prof Charles Lautenbach**

### **My dad was a great man – in so many ways...**

My Dad was a great man. Like many great men, he did not have an easy start to life. He spent his early childhood on a mission station in Lesotho, but when he was six, his single mother put him into Nazareth House Orphanage so that she could work. While there, a Father Celestine started a boys' choir, but he noticed that this boy was too bright to go out to work after Grade 7 like all the others, so he managed to get dad a scholarship at Marist Brothers. He had to earn his own way through university, working in the mines and as a steward on trains, and still found the energy to join in many university activities.

Perhaps this start helped make him who he was, or perhaps it was his personality that helped him rise against the odds. Either way, my dad was very determined - some might even say stubborn - and would never give up in the face of a challenge. He was very hardworking and had amazing energy, and would happily be on the go 16 hours a day, while those younger than him flaked out, exhausted, trying to keep up. He was independent and self-reliant - he took pride in the title "general manager" referring to how he managed to get a job done with whatever he had. Another lesson he learned among unkind people as a child, was that being affable and making friends was far better than fighting with people. The proof of this philosophy is how widely loved he is today. His fluency in African languages and his upbringing in Lesotho meant that could get on with people in all walks of life.

After med school, as he was struggling to pay off his loans, his ability to get along with people made him a very suitable candidate to be the doctor on the South African team that went to SANAE Base in Antarctica for a year in 1962, where he also had to be the dentist and the vet for the huskies. Before he left, he got engaged to my mum, and his sparse radio contact with her that year was a foretaste of things to come.

Throughout the 60s and 70s as he worked long and hard to specialize and build his career, he was not home as much as most husbands and fathers, and my mother spent many hours waiting up for him with dinners and supporting him behind the scenes. Nevertheless, we all knew that he loved us very much. He was always a most generous provider. I remember him saying, when I asked him about money spent getting a friend back on his feet "I didn't waste the money, I USED it! And it was money well spent." I learned from him that money is not meant to be hoarded, but used in the service of others. One of his favourite uses for money was giving things to those he loved, and I learned to be careful what I asked him for, or asked him to do, because he would bend over backwards to do or give it.

As a father he was very patient and kind, and very rarely lost his temper. It took a lot to rattle him. I remember once we were on holiday in St Lucia, and the little motorboat we rented took on too much water over a swell and started to sink. The hippos on the estuary were watching with interest. Unflapped, my dad opened the cool bag and offered around the cooldrinks so that we could use the cans afterwards to bail out the water!

Nothing would make him hurry or miss a meal - there was always time for tea or breakfast - even if he was supposed to have left an hour ago. Even on his last day, he had a good breakfast of porridge before he left - this time for heaven.

Through whatever happened in his life, including his illness, he was always cheerful and positive (although realistic) and maintained a great sense of humour. I learned a love for wordplay from him. He loved his work, which is always a wonderful thing, but also had a deep love for nature and the outdoors, especially the Drakensberg where he was born. Out of his love for nature and the outdoors came his enjoyment of gardening, birdwatching, animals, and just being out walking, from which came his long enjoyment

of orienteering.

He was also fond of working with his hands and fixing and designing things - he almost studied engineering instead of medicine. And this fed into the specialty he chose and his various medical inventions. A patient long ago gave him an 'award' engraved "World's Greatest Carpenter."

Rooted in the days in the choir with Father Celestine is the great pleasure he took in music classical, jazz, and even rock.

My dad was gifted with great intelligence, and we could always ask him about any classical music piece or birdcall, not to mention all the friends and family who were able to ask him about aches and pains and medical complaints. With all that in his head, he can be forgiven for not having a great memory for some details. We still chuckle about the time he called my mum from the bank to ask, "Darling, what's your name?" And the time he called home and gave my grandma a shock when he said "I've lost my memory," referring to the notebook he always used to keep track of things, not traumatic amnesia.

I can't begin to calculate how many lives and limbs my father has saved over the years, or how many people he has taught. He has left a large hole in the world.

### **Eulogy by dr Richard Kyte for Professor Charles Lautenbach**

**Alala Ngoxolo Mkhulu. Rest in Peace, Prof.**

***Earle Eugene Gerard (Charles) Lautenbach – 23 August 1932-23 June 2018***

Where does one start to speak about such a great, yet so humble a man, as Prof Charles Lautenbach? And impossible to encapsulate in a few moments here today.

Even some of the recent descriptions I have heard used recently by his friends and colleagues - Giant, Legend, Icon, Pioneer - do not come close to encompassing Prof.

He certainly had a pioneering spirit: being Medical Officer to the 3<sup>rd</sup> SA National Antarctic Expedition in 1962. He was noted to have performed appendectomies and dental procedures, with a Radio Operator as the anaesthetist, operating various syringes. And a diesel mechanic doubled-up as the pathologist!

In fact, whilst in Antarctica, he undertook a research project into Cold Weather Acclimatization and Frost Bite, URT bacterial and viral colonization and contamination – and research into Vitamin C metabolism.

Prof had a life-long thirst for knowledge. The real definition of a Scientist.

He was actually the first Fellow in Orthopaedics of the College of Medicine of South Africa.

Of course, Prof Lautenbach was well known for his suction-instillation system – the so-called “Lautenbach Irrigation System” – but he also had many other innovations, including the long Arthrodesis nail for knee arthrodesis and his customised elbow arthrodesis implant, amongst many others. Also, his teaching of a simple figure-of-eight “minimal tension” suture technique is revolutionary in wound closure and minimizing wound complications.

He was undoubtedly a world-renowned pioneer in the treatment of bone and joint infections, having delivered symposia all over the world, including many parts of the UK, Egypt, Israel, Pakistan and China. He also wrote chapters in four textbooks and had numerous international peer-reviewed publications.

But these innovations were only the cherry on the top of the management of bone and joint infection, the proficiency in which Prof Lautenbach transferred to more the 250 registrars from all over the world over the past half century that he practiced Orthopaedics. He imparted his patiently-gleaned scientific expertise to new “experts” at home and all over the globe, including China, Rwanda, USA and the UK, all of whom have conveyed their condolences.

But whenever thinking of Prof, one theme comes to mind – something I battle with daily myself – TIME. And that’s not just wrestling with the clock, it’s far deeper than that.

You see the treatment of bones – and infection, in particular – takes a lot of time and patience. Time never concerned Prof and he had the patience which Job himself, would have found admirable!

Prof never knew the word “No.” He was always willing to assist a person in need – and that very often included his colleagues – any time, day or night – and always with a lavish indulgence of his time – not to mention the 2 or 3-page letter which would follow shortly thereafter, detailing his further thoughts on the patient and relevant condition.

Such was Prof’s passion for his work that those who observed him at work may have initially confused a Love of Labour for Prof’s Labour of Love. He mentioned on numerous occasions that he had never worked a day in his life because he loved what he did. And what a mark he has left on all of the recipients of that labour of love. He always mentioned how eternally grateful he was to his family – and, in particular his wife, Molly – for their forbearance and

tolerance in allowing him the time to perform his work. Prof's car was routinely the last car in the car park at Milpark Hospital.

Prof was a true doctor. No, in fact, a true Healer.

Septic orthopaedic patients are often derelict by the effects of their condition, without a job, a spouse and an income – and much of Prof's work entailed psychological healing of the patients in overcoming their ordeal – or even coming to accept a compromise on those few occasions when it proved impossible to fully reconstruct a limb.

Some years ago, one of Prof's patients presented him with a sign and he insisted he display it in his office. It read: "The Buck Stops Here." How true. He never shied away from a challenge - the bigger the better. Ever and optimist!

The first time I met Prof, I had been asked as a first-year registrar to go across to Milpark Hospital from the Johannesburg Hospital at short notice. Prof had already started operating when I walked into Theatre. He greeted me by name – which I found amazing in itself – "wet-behind-the-ears" first-year registrar that I was – but then proceeded to hand me the scalpel and said: "I would cut here." I couldn't believe it! Shortly thereafter, I was gradually introduced to all the instruments by name – Froment Junior, Froment Senior, Teaspoon, Soup Spoon and "No Good Scissors", just to name a few! All of us who have operated alongside Prof know these members of his set well, with his famous classical music playing in the background.

I remember one time, when performing a tricky op, and Prof was performing his deft retraction as he would, I asked him to mind his fingers, to which he replied: "No, you mind my fingers!"

Prof had a special gift of being able to put everyone around him at ease.

Despite his somewhat encyclopaedic knowledge of Orthopaedics, he never made anyone feel inferior. He was affectionately known as Mkhulu (Grandfather) by the staff. Prof was fluent in both Zulu and Sotho. He was truly cherished – and rightly so.

He loved red wine and was a true connoisseur, so much so that when Barney Hurwitz asked Prof Lautie to join what is now Milpark Hospital, his contract to work there included the provision of a bottle of red wine (just a small 250ml bottle, mind you, for Prof and his registrar) after the theatre list – a real treat after a long list. Although a lover of classical music, he was always up for a party, always one of the first to take to the dance floor and never failing to party with the junior doctors at the various functions.

As a diligent supporter of the SA Orthopaedic Association, he attended every annual congress.

Another hallmark of Prof Lautenbach was never to give up – he had incredible tenacity – from the months it took to cure a patient suffering from and infected bone or joint, to the 10 or 12 hour operations, to his persistence in finding the controls on an orienteering route – but also, having been in excellent health for most of his life, his determined refusal to let his disease overcome him, and insistence to endeavour to relish every moment that he

could, continuing to help patients whilst undergoing both chemotherapy and radiotherapy himself.

He even came to assist me in an operation on one of his patients, who had mentioned she wanted him to, just one week prior to his passing. Once we had connected Prof up to nasal cannula oxygen, with saturation meter neatly attached to an ear lobe, confirming his saturations were in excess of 80%, he was ready to rock and roll again – and back in fine form!

I can scarcely believe that Prof has left us. The only thing that may, perhaps, eclipse Prof's immense brilliance as an Orthopaedic Surgeon and Doctor is his prowess as a person – as a human being.

As opposed to the memories of someone, who has passed on, Prof Lautenbach has provided each and every one of us with something much more precious. Through his incredible humanity, he has somehow changed each of us inside. By knowing him and learning from him in countless ways, his legacy is the way he has somehow inserted a little piece of his special magic and enthusiasm for life into each and every one of us – and this can never fade.

Alala Ngoxolo Mkhulu. Rest in Peace, Prof.