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## GUEST EDITORIAL

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### On mentorship and collegiality

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“A doctor shall show colleagues and co-workers respect and shall help, advise and guide them.”

This sentence is contained in a paragraph about collegiality from the Norwegian code of medical ethics which deals specifically with the issue of guidance. It goes on to say that “... a colleague is a peer and collegiality refers to the way in which peers should behave towards one another. Collegiality is usually associated with solidarity, respect and loyalty”.

At a time when our profession has been subjected to a degree of scrutiny hitherto unimagined, even to the most hardened of sceptics, these vital aspects of professional conduct and interaction are particularly topical.

We are in the grip of a global calamity that has undoubtedly left not a single one of the 7.5 billion souls on the planet untouched. The assault on healthcare systems worldwide has been relentless and healthcare workers have borne the brunt. If ever colleagues and co-workers have needed support and guidance from within their own ranks, now must surely be the time.

Not only has the pandemic itself created an environment requiring efforts nothing short of superhuman, the deleterious effect of the prevailing conditions on healthcare workers, physically, mentally and emotionally, constitute a bona fide crisis in itself. The constant barrage of unscientific hubris from conspiracy theorists and Google University graduates, feasted upon by sensation hungry lay press and misguided internet crusaders, further exacerbates an already profoundly unfortunate situation. It certainly does us no favours when once respected clinicians and scientists add their voice to the chirping from the proverbial peanut gallery.

In South Africa, ill prepared as we were for the situation, with a public healthcare system already on its knees and floating rudderless on a sea of desperation after more than two decades of fiscal mismanagement and administrative ineptitude, we could hardly have asked for a more unwanted sucker punch.

Yet, with the quintessential cocktail of guts, determination and can-do attitude our country and its people have become known for, we appear to have managed to keep the stricken vessel afloat

and on course for what appear to be relatively calmer waters. At least for the time being.

This has, certainly in the public sector, largely been thanks to the so-called “frontliners”. The fresh-faced, eager youngsters keen to get to grips with the realities and unique challenges of our noble profession. Thanks to them and those who guide and teach them.

We all know how exacting the process of becoming a doctor is. Given the ever-increasing interference of legislators and funders, whatever chosen career path one embarks upon is constantly littered with obstacles and hindrances which would detract from the enjoyment and fulfilment of clinical practice.

Yet here too, the vast majority of our colleagues have shown their unwavering dedication and determination to honour the oath we all took. As have the legions of co-workers and allied healthcare colleagues. Surely special mention must be made in this instance of probably our most underrated and unappreciated assets, our colleagues in the nursing profession. Without a nurse to care for their patient, a doctor is but a brush without paint.

Similarly, an eager young clinician is unlikely to progress much beyond their ideal without the true north on their compass represented by the ones whose example they follow. If their peers and contemporaries are the foundation from which they draw the strength and courage to persevere, their teachers are the inspiration without which their road would remain ever less travelled, their journey seemingly all the more arduous and uncertain.

Without mentoring and subtle guidance, much of what we have come to take for granted would, in all probability, not exist and the vast fonts we as clinicians are privileged to be able to draw on would be devoid of much of their riches.

At the risk of beating the Newtonian drum once too often, the shoulders of the giants we stand on select themselves by the very nature of the manner in which they influence us on our respective journeys through the corridors of clinical tutelage.

Not all giants are created equal. There are the juggernauts who, by their gargantuan personae, create a lasting impression of awe and admiration. By the same token, there are the more gentle and less forceful, who leave an equally indelible legacy, albeit more subtly so.

Any attempt to single out people who have influenced my development and progress of my career path would, by the very nature of the endeavour, do a disservice to those whose names are not mentioned, however deserving. That said, I am going to offer myself on the altar of sacrifice and beg their forbearance and forgiveness for any unintended slight. Any such possible disrespect would be purely by omission rather than intent.

The most omnipresent medical figure I remember was our family GP, Dr Koos van der Merwe. I remember this soft-spoken, gentle giant with great affection and respect. The epitome of a loving, caring doctor who looked after both my parents all their lives and especially in their twilight years, regularly visiting them at home when they were weak and frail, Dr Koos was always there. He was always patient, empathetic, understanding and, invariably accurate in his diagnostic assessment and therapeutic decision making.

More than anyone else I can remember, Dr Koos was the man who made me want to be a doctor.

Having my appendix removed at the age of seven probably sealed the deal. Although I have no recollection of any such events, my parents regularly told me of my fascination with my own experience, which allegedly led to my incurring the wrath of my sister when I "operated" on her dolls with the aid of a kitchen utensil.

Dr Org Ferreira left an indelible impression on me as a student and single-handedly cemented my decision to follow a surgical career, by passionately imparting his love of the art of surgery, coupled with his inimitable swashbuckling manner. Prof. Ben Vorster, Prof. Japie Hough, Prof. Daan Meyer and Prof. Andre Steyn in particular were almost instrumental in swaying me to rather attempt to scale the heights of Internal Medicine.

Two years spent under the supervision of the indefatigable Prof. Ben de Vaal, in his desperate attempts to instil the finer

nuances of critical care medicine, almost led to my pursuing a career in pulmonology.

In the end though, my fascination with cardiorespiratory physiology and my love of surgery superseded these flirtations. Cardiothoracic surgery was always going to be the obvious choice.

I had the enormous privilege of spending my registrar training in a department steeped in history, headed by a scientist, surgeon and energetic leader in the person of Prof. Peter Zilla. He embodied the importance of combining science and medicine, clinical excellence and research endeavour and a work ethic second to none.

Even more so then, my unique privilege of having two people who have been and still remain mentors, colleagues and close friends. Prof. Johan Brink and Prof. Anthony Linegar, both indisputable leaders in their respective fields, have left an indelible impression on my development as a clinician, a surgeon and a human being by their dedication, patience and generosity. Mention must surely also be made of Dr Johan Rossouw, who, along with the two formerly named esteemed gentleman, taught me the crucial art of remaining calm under pressure, no matter how calamitous the haemorrhage or how intimidating the tumour might appear. Gentleman surgeons each one.

Plutarch is credited with the eternal pedagogic wisdom of preaching that "... the mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled." The respect, patience and encouragement I have encountered in more than 30 years of medicine (accompanied, fortunately, by the odd timeous and totally appropriate rebuke) have shaped my career and adorned it with a rich, diverse tapestry of experiences. These giants and the many others whose names I have omitted, each occupy a throne on my Mount Olympus.

It is surely incumbent upon each of us to follow closely and, when our time comes, to lead by example.

Based on my own experience, our profession remains in good hands and the future, no matter how great the challenges that await, looks bright.