

In memory of Dr Frank Snyckers – a short overview of his life delivered by the family at his funeral on 29 December 2018

Frank Dieter Snyckers was born on 10 June 1940 in Tübingen, Germany, right in the middle of the war. He told his son Christian many years later that some of his earliest vivid memories were of having absolutely nothing at all, helping his mother scrounge for cigarette butts and stealing potatoes to stay alive. This mother, Lore, a most remarkable woman, was the daughter of Dr Hugo Sellheim, who was the professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, head of the Frauenklinik in Leipzig, and Privy Councillor.

Frank's father Hans had a doctorate in Law and a doctorate in Economics. Frank grew up on the family farm, Drumbergen, in a village called Asendorf, on the Lüneburge Heide, near Hamburg. His cousin Hartwig, who visited Frank and Ria as recently as November this year, still lives on the farm with his family. Frank's primary school was the Johanneum Gymnasium in Lüneburg, a school with a 600 year-old tradition. Frank was the second of five sons. His eldest brother Hugo passed away in 2002. His youngest brother Peter drowned in the Apies river as a 15-year-old boy. Brothers Wolf and Fritz survive Frank, and we are grateful to have them here today.

In 1953, the family started a new life in South Africa. Frank went into standard six at Afrikaans Seuns Hoër in Pretoria, the "blertie immigrant" who could not speak a word of English or Afrikaans. He had to learn quickly. The principal said that he should learn some "tact", after he wrote in his first Afrikaans essay that the schools in Germany were so much better than the schools in South Africa. For his whole life, and particularly in his profession, Frank firmly believed that his honest opinion, politely and tenderly expressed, was far more important than "tact".

The only initial impression he made on a very proper girl from Meisies Hoër called Ria Krüger was of being one of "those wild Snyckers boys", who had almost ruined her beautiful marionette collection one day on a visit with his parents to the Krüger.

Frank went to the navy to help him decide what he wanted to do in life. It turned out to be medicine. And he did medicine as it has seldom been done before.

Father Hans and mother Lore, known to the family as *Vati* and *Mutti*, founded and built the pharmaceutical company Noristan from scratch. From tiny beginnings it grew to a

massively successful concern, spawning such legacies as the Hans Snyckers Institute at the University of Pretoria.

Vati at some point in 1965 dared Frank to take out a decent girl for once – how about that wonderful Ria, the daughter of Dr Mannie Krüger, the MD of Iscor, and his splendid wife Elise. Mannie and Elise instantly loved Frank. Those were the days when Ria, who never smoked, felt smoking a cigarette and ordering a dry martini might just strike this dashing man, who looked like Omar Sharif, as the signs of sophistication in a girl on a date, and it obviously worked. Two weeks after the first date, Frank informed Ria that they were going to go out for nine months, then get engaged, and then get married nine months later. His prediction was spot on, and they got married on 13 May 1967. Three sons followed, Hans, Frank and Christian. They in turn brought three very beloved daughters into the family, Diedre, Fiona and Merle. On 13 May 2017, Frank and Ria celebrated the 50th anniversary of their most beautiful marriage, the centre of their life together.

Frank obtained his medical qualifications at the University of Pretoria, and became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh after a 3 month stint in that city, in 1970. From 1971 Frank followed a career in neurosurgery that defied superlatives. Keith Allan, Head of Neurosurgery at Wits, introduced Frank to this specialization that was so fortunate to have been graced for 50 years by a giant such as Frank.

Frank did a 6-month fellowship at the University of Western Ontario in Canada where he met and was mentored by one of the great professional influences of his career, Charles Drake. It was a lovely honour for Frank to be invited to deliver a “Festschrift” lecture for Charles Drake and Barney Barnett at the university of Western Ontario in 1986. While at Ontario, Frank received a scholarship to do a fellowship in the Kantonspital in Zurich under a legend voted as “neurosurgeon of the century” by the Congress of Neurosurgeons in America in 2000, Professor Gazi Yasargil. Charlie Drake, Gazi Yasargil and Ossie van Rensburg of Tuks were the three most influential sculptors of Frank’s spectacular career in neurosurgery. An unsurpassed work-ethic, stamina that seemed superhuman, and the deep empathy that made no patient of his ever forget him, finished off the professional product, which was oiled and fuelled by full-time devotion and support from Ria, who was not only chief, cook and bottle washer, but field marshall, FD, COO and spiritual leader too.

It was Frank’s 100-mile-an-hour-24-hours-a day-marathon that ultimately did it for his poor heart. He literally worked himself to a standstill after 50 years. And he loved every second of it. He was unable to stomach holidays of more than two weeks without experiencing severe withdrawal symptoms.

Frank's practice started at the Princess Nursing Home in Hillbrow, as a partner to Dr Eddie Rosenberg. For a while he ran three practices, one in Johannesburg, one in Vereeniging and one in the Flora Clinic. His patients comprised basically the population of South Africa and some others thrown in for good measure. By 1990, when asked by Milpark Hospital what facilities he might require to lure him there as the Princess was closing down, Frank could cheekily suggest 2 theatres, a 35 bed ward, an ICU unit with 6 beds, and a long wish list of equipment and machines, not to mention space and sunlight. Milpark jumped and said yes, please, thank you, and so he started his golden years from 1991 to date, retiring from surgery in 2013, and thereafter doing the medico-legal work he found so interesting and rewarding right until the day before he was admitted to hospital.

Apart from his extraordinary breadth of academic and practical surgical knowledge and skill, what truly made Frank the surgeon that he was, and left an army of devoted and grateful patients and families, was the way he dealt with his patients and their families as a human being. The empathy he manifested was what was extra, and what stayed with them all.

Frank was the President of the Society of Neurosurgeons of South Africa from 2004 – 2006, Federal Councillor of the South African Medical Association from 1990 – 2000 and the President and Convener of the Bi-Annual Congress of the South African Spine Society in 2009. In addition to his directorships at Noristan and Norimed, he was also on the Executive Committee of the Professional Provident Society from 1990-1994 and on the German Committee of the German South Africa Foundation from 1978 to 1992. He also served on the Board of SAMLA for many years, where his presence, experience and wisdom were greatly valued. He was a giant amongst men and his presence will be sorely missed.

Frank has eight grandchildren, Julia, Kirstin, Adam, Dieter, Charlotte, Lore, Alex and Ria, who loved and will miss their Oupa very much.