

HONORARY GRADUATE

Daniel Jacob du Plessis

Daniel Jacob du Plessis was born on 17 May 1918 in Paarl into an Afrikaans-speaking home. He attended a dual-medium school, Paarl Boys High, and went on to study for the degree of Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery at the University of Cape Town. On his qualifying at the end of 1941, he volunteered for the army and served his internship at military hospitals in Pretoria and Sonderwater.

From 1943 to 1945 he was a captain in the 20th South African Field Ambulance, with the 6th Armoured Division in the British 8th Army, and for a while in the American 5th Army in North Africa and Italy.

From 1946 to 1950 Dr Du Plessis (as he then was) did postgraduate surgical training in the Universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand, which included work at the Somerset Hospital and Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town and at Baragwanath Hospital in Johannesburg. In 1951 he obtained the degree of Master of Surgery at the University of the Witwatersrand. In the same year was awarded the Nuffield Scholarship, which took him to England for eighteen months, where he divided his time between Oxford University and the Hospitals of St Mary, St Thomas and St James. He became a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1951.

From June 1952 until June 1958 Mr Du Plessis (as he then was) was a lecturer and surgeon on the joint medical staff of Groote Schuur Hospital and the University of Cape Town. On 1 July 1958 he was appointed Professor of Surgery and Head of the Department of Surgery at this university. At that time the department was in a parlous and demoralized state. When Professor Du Plessis handed over to his successor nineteen years later he left a superbly organized and highly productive department, which had taken its place among the finest in the world.

Professor Du Plessis's own research interest followed several directions, such as diseases of the parotid salivary glands, intestinal motility and the effects of gastrectomy, but it was his demonstration of the consequences of abnormal duodenogastric reflux and the elucidation of the aetiology of gastric ulcer that represented his greatest contribution and earned him international acclaim. Through his leadership, he inculcated an attitude of vigorous enquiry and research in his department, which produced spectacular results in the international arena. His protégés achieved eminence in such fields as other aspects of surgical gastroenterology, notably the oesophagus, in organ transplantation and transplantation immunobiology, and in peripheral vascular disease. Today they hold chairs at several South African and overseas universities.

Professor Du Plessis played a major role in the establishment of the College of Medicine of South Africa and in surgical affairs. He brought into being the now well-established Biennial Congress of the Association of Surgeons of South Africa, and was instrumental in the creation of an official journal for the Association, the *South African Journal of Surgery*. The Surgical Research Society of Southern Africa was his brain-child. The impact of its creation on surgical research in this country is inestimable in terms of the stimulus it has provided to surgeons nation-wide. His international stature and influence led to the acceptance of papers of the Surgical Research Society of Southern Africa at the triennial tripartite meetings of the British, European and

American societies, and to the subsequent extension of similar privileges to the Australians and the Japanese. In recognition of his contribution to the Society and to surgical research, the Society founded the D J du Plessis Lecture and invited Professor Du Plessis to be the first lecturer.

In 1972 Professor Du Plessis was elected a Corresponding Fellow of the American Surgical Association. At that time he was the only South African to have been elected to that status. He also became a corresponding member of the British Association of Surgeons and of the British Surgical Research Society. He was made an honorary Fellow of the American College of Surgeons in 1974, a distinction rarely awarded.

In 1968 Professor Du Plessis was elected by the University Senate to represent it on the University Council. This he did until the end of 1973, when he was appointed a part-time Deputy Vice-Chancellor, serving until Professor Bozzoli retired at the end of 1977, when he was appointed by the University Council to succeed him as Vice-Chancellor and Principal.

There is no doubt as to the loyalty, energy and totally selfless devotion with which Professor Du Plessis met this new challenge. He had vision and faith and the determination to make that vision and faith a reality. His concept of the role of Wits, as the only English-medium university in the interior of the country, was that it should serve all in that vast area, and not merely in the Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging region, who sought a university education through the medium of English. To do so the University had to be able to meet the calls of our complex society, and to be able to grow in parallel with the demand for places. Professor Du Plessis set the University to examining its long-term future and how these challenges should be met, through the production of an academic plan, a physical plan and a financial plan.

In the event, it was as well that forward planning on this scale had been undertaken, for the University entered upon a series of years of unexpectedly rapid expansion. In 1977, Professor Bozzoli's last year of office, there were 11 340 registered students, and when Professor Du Plessis retired in 1983 the number had risen to 15 790, an increase of 39 per cent. The Milner Park campus, already crowded, became increasingly inadequate, but the acquisition of the Showground site, which will effectively double the campus area, afforded the prospect of relief. This achievement, one of the most significant events in the history of the University, was very largely ascribable to Professor Du Plessis's imagination, drive and persistence, and right up to the day of its realization few thought that he had any chance of attaining success. Even before the negotiations had been brought to a successful conclusion Professor Du Plessis appointed a team to undertake the planning of the future West Campus, and the process reached an advanced stage during his period of office.

With the increasing size and complexity of the University came the need for the devolution of administrative and academic decision-making. Professor Du Plessis perceived this clearly, and initiated the necessary steps to transfer authority from the central administration to the faculties, a process that is still under way. A major concern was the small proportion (compared with other residential universities) of students in residence, and Professor Du Plessis took active steps to improve the situation. In addition to promoting decisions that led to the construction of further conventional student accommodation, he was largely responsible for the introduction of student flats at The Crescent and the Student Village around the Oval, new concepts that have been enthusiastically received.

In his years as the executive head of the University, Professor Du Plessis insisted that the institution ought to be regarded not as a microcosm of South African society but as a special and privileged place where scholars should be free to consider any issue in a scholarly way, subject always to the law of the land and to the ordinary courtesies of academic life. Free debate should be encouraged at all times, but the University should be careful to adopt an official stance only on educational matters.

While actively encouraging the many support programmes for academically underprivileged students, Professor Du Plessis refused to countenance any decline in academic standards.

Professor D J du Plessis has rendered outstanding service to the University as Professor of Surgery, as Deputy Vice-Chancellor, and as Vice-Chancellor; he has rendered outstanding service to his discipline of surgery; he has rendered outstanding service to the cause of education and to the country as a whole. To the University it is a deep privilege and a source of immense pride that it is able to confer on this man of vision, courage, determination and dedication - this man of quality - its mark of highest esteem for contribution to the public weal, the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.