Claude H. Organ, Jr., M.D., F.A.C.S., F.C.S. (S.A.) (Hon.)

Obituary

Born on 16 October 1928 in Marshall, Texas, Claude Organ attended school in Denison, Texas, and then college in New Orleans, Mississippi. He did exceptionally well at both and was accepted at Creighton School of Medicine in Omaha, Nebraska, in the single place allocated for a black student per year. Although he had experienced racialism during his school and college years, Omaha was also to prove an experience for him. As always, he succeeded despite the problems, and remained at Creighton to complete his surgical training between 1952 and 1957. After a stint in the Navy, he returned to Creighton to a staff position in 1960, rapidly rising in the ranks until in 1971 he was appointed as the first black Chairman of Surgery at a predominantly white medical school in the USA. He remained in this post to 1982. He then moved to Oklahoma City and then to the University of California, first in Oakland (UC Davis) and finally to UCSF.

A true leader in medicine and a great academic surgeon, Claude Organ was honored by many organisations and held many prestigious positions both in the USA and in world surgery. Among the former, he was the first black surgeon to be Chairman of the American Board of Surgery and the second to become President of the American College of Surgeons. He had many personal quotes for which he will be remembered. One we appreciated was ‘If the dean is having difficulty recruiting black students, residents or faculty, he should turn recruitment over to the football or basketball coach – they seem to do quite well.’

We were both privileged to know this great surgeon, academic and larger-than-life human being well, and we valued his very special friendship. He also valued his contacts with South Africa. At various times he was a most successful visiting Professor to our departments at UCT (first J. H. Louw Professor) and at Wits (Miller Foundation Professor). He was made an Honorary Fellow of the College of Surgeons of South Africa in 1986, an award he always treasured.

On behalf of his many friends in South Africa and in world surgery, we pay tribute to the memory of a great surgical leader. He leaves his wonderful wife Elizabeth (Betty) and their close-knit family, to whom we offer our sincere condolences.

John Terblanche
J. A. (Bert) Myburgh