



rettelsweN is the banner name for issues of the Club's Newsletter that contain no Club news and are produced simply to entertain members. All members are invited to submit short articles for possible inclusion in an issue of rettelsweN. These need be of no particular consequence, and need not be written by the member. Alternatively, write a rettel to the Editor! Just send the text as an email, with the pictures as attachments, to the Editor at [dhm@tinmar.co.za](mailto:dhm@tinmar.co.za).

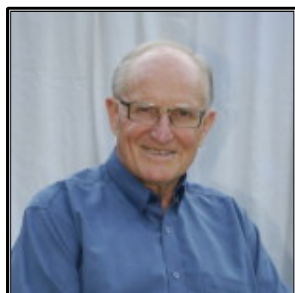
## The pains and pleasures of being fired

by JP van Niekerk

### My firing

I was fired. Someone once said that the reason battles in universities are so intense is because the stakes are so low. However, big business and politics are no different.

I was Dean of the UCT Faculty of Health Sciences and, in 1996 was coming to the end of my first term of appointment in this position. I could have signed up for a second term but instead opted to throw open the race for the post as political changes were swirling about. The Faculty held workshops to consider its future direction and drew up requirements for a dean. I was one of the applicants and was re-elected on a new five-year contract.



JP van Niekerk

My reappointment as Dean coincided with the appointment of Dr. Mamphela Ramphele as Vice-Chancellor (VC) of UCT. Very soon she stated publicly that she could not go into the new millennium with old all-white deans at UCT. Her restructuring of the university was driven by a Deputy Vice-Chancellor who was her right-hand man, and soon created problems for the Faculty of Health Sciences. In particular, appointments of new staff were frequently blocked higher up in the university's complex new chain of command for reasons that were hard to fathom. So with my Assistant Dean, Dr. Nosisa Matsiliza, I arranged a meeting to discuss this with Dr. Ramphele. This was not taken well.

Not long afterwards one of the other Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Prof Dan Ncayiyana, asked me in passing if I had ever given thought to pursuing another line of work. I replied that indeed I had but that I had been delighted to accept my reappointment as Dean. A short while later he called me to another meeting and told me that I had to leave my post as Dean - there was no choice in the matter. I was flabbergasted! Was it the Faculty that wanted me out? I had believed that I had their full support? No – it was the VC and her right-hand man. That provided reassurance that it was not my colleagues, which would have been devastating. I was told that the university would pick up my tab in another role. To me the process was unreasonable to the bearer of the message, Prof Dan, as the VC herself should have discussed the matter with me.

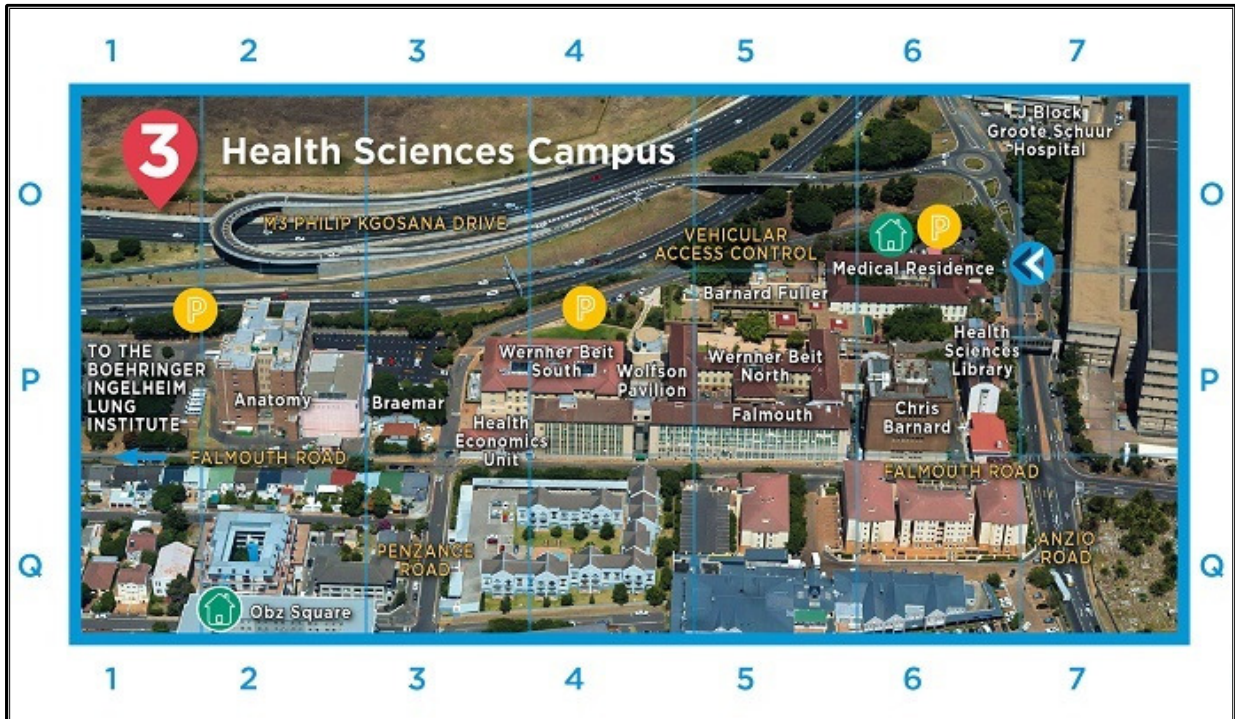


Mamphela Ramphele

To the consternation of the University hierarchy I called a Faculty meeting where I informed them that I had been requested to step down as Dean. There was considerable consternation – even outrage. What had I done to deserve this? Was I having an affair with one of my staff? The

embarrassed Prof Dan, who attended the meeting, could only say that it was a 'matter of chemistry'. I said that I would stand down subject to three conditions:

1. that the Faculty determines whether to go along with the 'instruction' and that a committee be elected to consider this;
2. that if the Faculty thought that my leaving was best for all then I would comply but would be appointed in some other position to my satisfaction, and
3. that the Faculty itself would be responsible for the appointment of my successor.



The Faculty committee had many interviews and concluded that it was not tenable to be in a position of constant conflict with the 'authorities' who wanted me out. Therefore, it would be wiser for me to step aside. This was not to my liking, but I took the advice as I had stated at the Faculty meeting. Then it was a matter of discussion with the UCT Registrar who invented the new title 'Dean Emeritus' to signal that I remained on the same level. A new contract was drawn up that included my spending some of my time in the Radiology Department.

At first things were quiet but as the reality of two salaries started biting, the University approached the Province to contribute to the costs of my new post as it did with all joint staff in the Faculty. Since it had not been involved in the process the Province refused. Then the pressure started mounting. The new Dean, whom the authorities had foisted upon the Faculty and whose dismissal too many years later for, inter alia, substance abuse, wrote me a letter that questioned whether I was fulfilling my contract. When I challenged him, he stated that he was acting on instructions from the VC and her right-hand man. I retorted that the letter bore his signature and that, if necessary, I would take him wherever necessary, together with those who had instructed him. Bold words, but bluff, as I could hardly go up against the financial clout of a major university. 'They' then launched a forensic audit into the financial affairs of the Postgraduate Medical Centre, which had been my responsibility, looking for a hidden private Swiss bank account, which they thought I had (more about this later). At this stage I decided to take legal advice from a good commercial lawyer. He



**Logo of the Health  
Sciences Faculty at UCT**

wrote me a letter, which he said, I should show to strategic people but keep in my possession. I showed this letter to Prof Dan and the colleague who was then acting as Dean during a temporary absence of the new Dean. The letter basically outlined the inappropriate nature of the University's actions against me and the possible consequences. Both responded: 'Oh sh#t'. From then on they left me undisturbed and I served out the three-and-a-half years remaining until I could retire in the normal way from UCT.

### **New-found freedom**

For me, the Dean's post had been demanding with little time for anything else. My new-found freedom allowed me to participate much more fully in a variety of other activities and in so doing to travel to many parts of the world and meet a variety of fascinating people.

In my last years as Dean, I had been to a World Health Organization (WHO) meeting in the Cameroon to plan for an African Medical Education Conference – a strange experience for me at the time as I was the only white face amongst the delegates from Africa. I was appointed as chairman and it was resolved to hold the Conference in Cape Town. The Conference was a great success with the publication of the Cape Town Declaration. And I was elected as President of the African Medical Schools Association (AMSA), a position I held from 1995 to 2008.

This position also gave me a seat on the executive committee of the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME). Years later, when I visited the bank in Switzerland that held AMSA money dating from the previous AMSA presidency I was informed that the money had, at my request, been transferred to UCT. However, my attempts to track it down and have it restored to AMSA were fruitless – it had disappeared into a black hole!

At that stage many countries had excellent medical education programmes. However, there was no set of international medical standards. It became my privilege to serve on task teams that, for the first time, developed such International Medical Education Standards for basic, postgraduate, and continuing professional development education, and for the accreditation of medical schools. See <https://wfme.org/>.

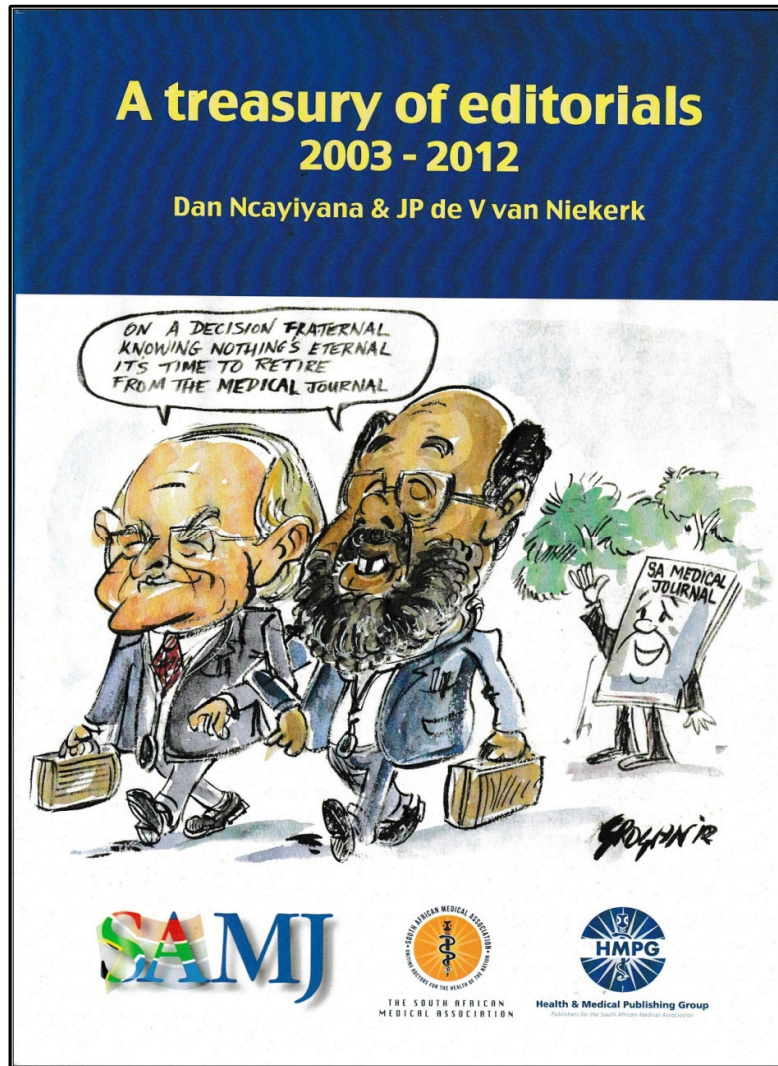
China was emerging into the World and a group of their top medical schools asked the China Medical Board in New York (a Rockefeller institute) to advise them on a medical curriculum that was globally accepted. Again, no such curriculum existed so the China Medical Board established the Institute for International Medical Education (IIME) and invited me to join their core committee, with members from all over the world, to develop a global curriculum. This was developed, applied in the medical schools, and the outcomes assessed - a remarkable experience and indeed, example of global cooperation. See [https://www.who.int/workforcealliance/members\\_partners/member\\_list/iime/en/](https://www.who.int/workforcealliance/members_partners/member_list/iime/en/).

In the Health Professions Council I chaired or was a member of several committees, and especially the Medical Education Committees, where I contributed to enhancing our medical education standards.

Professor Lionel Opie had kindly given me the use of a small office in his Heart Research suite. Previously I had dictated my letters and had been well looked-after by secretaries. Now I had to learn how to manage on my own with a computer. These experiences and the time to edit and publish material resulted, upon my retirement from UCT, in my being appointed as Managing Editor of the SA Medical Journal.

At the Publications division of the Medical Association, that published the SA Medical Journal, Prof Dan continued as part-time editor (he was then the Vice-Chancellor of the Durban University of Technology having overseen its establishment through the merger of Technicon Natal and ML Sultan Technicon). I was the full-time managing editor, and we shared the writing of challenging editorial articles.

This happy partnership lasted 11 years when we both stepped down and retired. The cartoon on the next page is by Tony Grogan and was published at the time. We continue to serve as Editors Emeritus and are members of a small group that reviews all submissions for publication in the SAMJ.



Cartoon by Tony Grogan

## In conclusion

My firing as Dean was painful but ultimately worked to my benefit. Not so, methinks, for the Faculty of Health Sciences, which suffered from the loss of some good staff and some unfortunate appointments.

Regarding Dr. Mamphela Ramphele, she resigned from UCT before completing her contract to take up appointment in New York as a Vice-President of the World Bank – an appointment that also terminated prematurely. Her forays in 2013 and 2014 into real politics failed. However, she continues to flourish at what she does best – as an activist and an ideas person with an insightful mind, working with organizations such as the Nelson Mandela Foundation and the Club of Rome, of which she is a co-chair. Our differences have long since been settled.

## rettelS to the Editor

With reference to *For my sins, I'm in charge* by Duncan Martin, rettelsweN dd 24 Feb 2021.

From John Rogers, Member

*Dear Duncan*

*I remember the Y2K worry very well!! I also knew Tony Hooper, now in Australia, and I know Dave Cowley (Hout Bay). I was in Smuts Hall with Fred Goldstein, but he was way senior to me. Brilliant man.*

From Jenny Day, Member

*Thanks, as always, Duncan.*

*As a matter of interest, Tony Hooper and I were first-years together way back in the early 1960s. I seem to remember doing some interminable Physics pracs with him.*

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*You're only given a little spark of madness. You mustn't lose it.*

Robin Williams, b. 1951, d. 2014, American actor and comedian.

*Every block of stone has a statue inside it and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.*

*I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free.*

Michelangelo