

Tribute to Professor Ella Hartman

(29/6/1942 – 8/01/2026)

Ella Vorster, or better known to her colleagues as Professor Ella Hartman, was an exceptional paediatrician who served the children of Soweto throughout most of her professional career with dedication and empathy. She instilled the essential values of responsibility and care in medical officers, registrars and colleagues. Ella was an outstanding clinician with superb clinical skills and a passionate teacher of both undergraduates and post-graduate students; she was a force of nature.

Ella was awarded her MB BCh by Stellenbosch University in 1965, Diploma in Paediatrics (Wits) in 1971, and FCP (Paeds) by the College of Medicine South Africa in 1972. She was the founding member of the haemophilia clinic in the Department of Paediatrics at Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital. Ella initiated the “walk-in treatment service” for haemophilia patients, and in 1983 her tireless efforts were rewarded with the Southern Transvaal Branch Haemophilia Foundation Travelling Fellowship Bursary, enabling her to visit haemophilia units in the UK and USA. In 1998, she was awarded the Exceptional Service Medal by the Faculty of Health Science, University of the Witwatersrand, in recognition of her outstanding service and many contributions to the Department and Faculty over many years.

Ella was a woman of strong opinions - on medicine, on hospital politics, on most things - and she held them with the kind of conviction that made fence-sitters choose a side very quickly. Junior doctors learned early that life was infinitely better on her good side. She had a simple motto that shaped her medical career: “*the best interest of the patient is all that matters*”.

Her clinical acumen was legendary. While others relied on blood tests, scans, and lumbar punctures, Ella could diagnose complex conditions through clinical examination. Rumour has it she once

sniffed out a case of meningitis from three beds away, leaving the microbiology laboratory scrambling to catch up.

Ella was deeply involved in the Department of Paediatrics at Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital, both in academic and administrative activities, and helped build the Department's reputation in the turbulent environment of the 70s and 80s. She was a College of Medicine examiner and coordinated the end-of-year examinations for fifth-year medical students for many years. Her administrative skills were put to good use when she successfully ran the Department of Paediatrics during a long interregnum, awaiting the appointment of a permanent head of department. She was a mentor, advisor, and irreplaceable “*second-in-command*” to numerous department heads, and she gave unfailing support to the Academic Head of the Department. Ella also knew the hospital system - she could bend bureaucracy to her advantage, navigate red tape like a seasoned sailor, and play the politics of Bara with the precision of a chess grandmaster. Administrators feared and admired her almost as much as junior doctors did.

Though she was formidable, she was also unforgettable. Her sharp wit, uncompromising standards, and uncanny diagnostic skills shaped generations of paediatricians. To be trained under her was to be terrified, humbled, and, eventually, grateful and certainly blessed.

Ella leaves behind a legacy of excellence, a trail of registrars and colleagues who still double-check results out of habit, and countless children whose lives were saved and enriched by her experience and clinical acumen.

She will be missed, highly respected and loved, and fondly remembered by so many friends and colleagues.

May she rest in peace and rise in glory.