

Celebrating the legacy of Prof. JP van Niekerk (29 December 1936 - 12 December 2025)



Emeritus Professor Johannes Philippus (JP) van Niekerk, a respected medical academic and long-serving managing editor of the *South African Medical Journal (SAMJ)*, passed away after a lifetime of extraordinary service to medical scholarship. He remained deeply involved in journal work until the very end, exemplifying an unwavering commitment to academic integrity, editorial excellence and the advancement of medicine in South Africa. He can be credited as one of the most influential figures in the editorial space of the *SAMJ*, where he demonstrated critical leadership in taking the journal forward. He joined the journal as its managing editor in 2001, and served in this capacity for 11 years before retiring from the position in October 2012. Using both his managerial and business skills, he was the driving force behind professionalising the journal's publishing operations. Prof. van Niekerk stated in an editorial in 2010 that 'medical journals are the mainstay for most doctors to keep up to date and to keep in touch with their profession.'^[1] He continued playing an active role in this regard. He served as Editor Emeritus of the *SAMJ* after his formal retirement, and actively participated on the Editorial Board until the very end.

As managing editor of the *SAMJ*, Prof. van Niekerk was pivotal in shaping the journal's expression, standards, impact and authority over many years, advancing rigorous peer review, ethical publishing and clarity of scientific communication. Under his editorial

leadership, the role of the journal as a trusted platform for publishing clinical research, health policy debate and professional reflection was strengthened. Moreover, his contributions to scholarly medical publishing extended far beyond routine editorial oversight. He was a mentor to authors, reviewers and editors. Many of us remember him for his meticulous attention to detail, intellectual honesty, insistence on fairness and balance and his deep institutional memory. His principled decision-making and quiet determination to uphold the highest standards of medical publishing, often working behind the scenes and frequently without recognition, are indelible traits that contributed to this giant of a man. Even in the later stages of his life, Prof. van Niekerk remained actively engaged with manuscripts, editorial discussions and journal governance. His sustained involvement until the very end stands as a testament to his dedication and sense of responsibility, not only to the journal, but to the medical profession at large.

The many roles that Prof. van Niekerk played positioned him as a national and international leader in medical ethics, education and health-system reform. Prior to his position at the *SAMJ*, he had a distinguished academic career, notably serving as the dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Cape Town from 1990 to 1998. He was appointed as the faculty's first deputy dean in the early 1970s, where he was instrumental in strengthening institutional governance and academic development during a formative period in the faculty's history. Through his outstanding leadership, the foundation for innovation, collaboration and excellence in medical education was laid down. At the faculty and beyond, he is well remembered for his academic excellence, interdisciplinary engagement and service to the profession.^[2]

Prof. van Niekerk's contributions to service to the country are far reaching. A significant example is his involvement with the Hospice Palliative Care Association (HPCA) of SA (now known as the Association of Palliative Care Centres) from its inception. He served as founding chair from 1993 to 2006. Thereafter, he continued to support the organisation as a patron, where he offered guidance and advocated for the growth and sustainability of palliative care services across the country. The advocacy role he played in this regard is laudable. During the HPCA's formative years,

his leadership helped establish hospice and palliative care as essential components of SA's health system, changing it from a Cinderella charitable add-on. He will be remembered for championing the integration of palliative care into mainstream health services, and for unwaveringly calling attention to the importance of dignity, compassion and equitable access for people facing life-limiting illness. While he is also known for advocating for legal reform for assisted dying, he continued to highlight the critical role of strong and accessible palliative care services.^[3]

Additionally, Prof. van Niekerk was an ardent sportsman, serving in the Western Province Squash Association and UCT Squash with distinction, and leaving behind a legacy of mentorship and sporting excellence.^[2] Beyond his professional achievements, he had a hidden talent – that of exquisite execution of the harmonica, which kept friends and family entertained on many afternoons and evenings. His presence was also valued within the Cape Town Press Club, where he participated with competence and zeal.

His sudden passing in December 2025 marks the loss of a leader, a giant of a man, overflowing with caring, compassion, generosity, humility and wisdom, who championed patient dignity and ethics and was a steadfast mentor to many. Prof. van Niekerk leaves behind a profound legacy in SA medical publishing. His influence endures in the quality of the journal he helped steward, the generations of clinicians and academics whose work he shaped, and the ethical foundations he worked tirelessly to protect. He will be remembered with deep respect, gratitude and admiration, The *SAMJ* honours Prof. JP van Niekerk with profound respect and appreciation, and we extend our condolences to his family and all who were touched by him.

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1. Van Niekerk JP. Our journals in flux. *S Afr Med J* 2010;100(4):189. <https://scielo.org.za/pdf/samj/v100n4/v100n4a01.pdf> (accessed 2 February 2026).
2. Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town. Honouring the legacy of Professor JP van Niekerk. Cape Town: UCT, 20 January 2026. <https://health.uct.ac.za/articles/2026-01-20-honouring-legacy-prof-jp-van-niekerk> (accessed 28 January 2026).
3. Association of Palliative Care Centres. Honouring Emeritus Professor JP van Niekerk, a foundational voice for palliative care in South Africa. APCC, 2026. <https://apcc.org.za/apcc-newsroom/honouring-emeritus-professor-jp-van-niekerk-a-foundational-voice-for-palliative-care-in-south-africa/> (accessed 28 January 2026).