

## Obituary

**Henri Pieter Albert de Boom** — 16 October 1914 – 30 August 1998

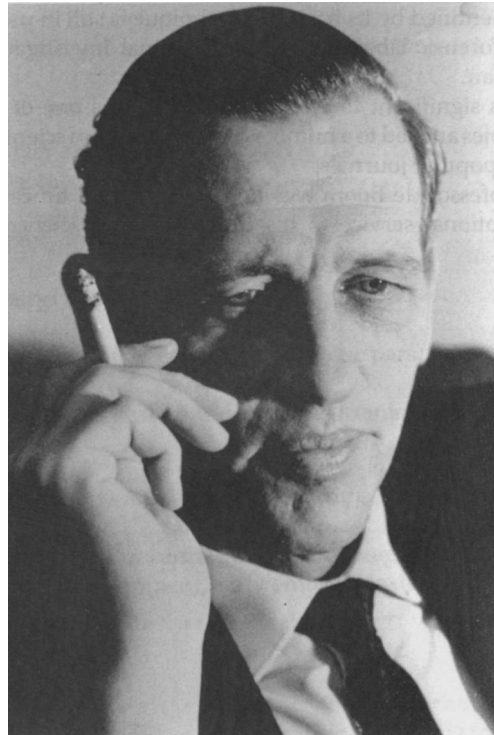
Just after midnight on Sunday morning, 30 August, veterinary science's best-loved and respected teacher passed on. He is survived by his children Marcella, Carin and Jannie and 8 grandchildren. He lost his wife, Sarie, in 1991. During the last years he fought valiantly against deafness and increasing blindness due to a retinal injury sustained in a serious motor accident during the 1980s.

From January 1937 until his retirement in 1974, 37 years later, Boompie was attached to Onderstepoort, initially as a research officer, later as a temporary lecturer in the Department of Anatomy, Faculty of Veterinary Science, until lecturing posts were changed from part-time to full-time. In October 1955 he succeeded Prof. Cecil Jackson as professor and head of the Department of Anatomy.

His very earliest memory, he said, was an unforgettable day when, as a toddler, he sat on the steps in front of his parents' home in Pretoria. His mother brought him something to drink and, as he turned towards her, he tumbled head over heels down the steps. He recalled that it was like a vivid slow-motion movie as he stood on his head and observed how fascinating the upside-down world appeared. This conscious sense of wonder about everything remained with him throughout his life.

Born in Pretoria, he started and completed his schooling at 'Oosteindschool'. He was head boy when he matriculated in 1931. The next year, he enrolled as a

1st-year student at Onderstepoort, where he qualified in 1936. Until then his career literally ran parallel to that of another well-known colleague, Prof. Mike de Lange.



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They started Grade 1 together at the Oosteindschool and received their BVSc degrees on the same day.

Although he officially retired in 1974, he never really did retire. From August 1975 until July 1976 he was a guest professor at Cornell University. This was his 2nd invitation to Cornell, where he became a popular and admired teacher and colleague. The Portuguese government and the University of Lourenço Marques requested him to lead the fledgling Department of Anatomy from 1968 to 1970. When he departed he left behind a host of grateful students and co-workers.

During 1979 and 1980 he taught anatomy and embryology at the Medical Faculty of the Medical University of Southern Africa (Medunsa). As if this was not enough of a challenge, he also taught embryology to zoology students at the University of Pretoria during the 2nd semester of 1980, and during the 1st quarter of 1981 he taught anatomy and embryology to pharmacology students at the Pretoria Technikon.

Back at Medunsa, he became assistant to the Dean of the Veterinary Faculty in April 1981 before becoming the temporary head of the Department of Anatomy, a position he held until 1985.

It is worth noting that he served a total of 12 years as editor of the *Journal of the South African Veterinary Association*. This intimate involvement with the entire spectrum of veterinary science was certainly a factor in expanding his astonishing knowledge of matters beyond his field.

When the police approached Professor de Boom about a way to track down poachers, he came up with a highly original technique. Hair specimens of a large number of game species were specially prepared and examined. The results proved that each species could be identified by its hair. This technique is still in use at the forensic laboratory of the Criminal Investigation Bureau.

His significant teratology collection was one of his hobbies and led to a number of publications in scientific and popular journals.

Professor de Boom was honoured several times for exceptional service to his profession and science in

general:

- Honorary Life Vice-President of the South African Veterinary Association, 1977.
- Honorary Life Member of the Anatomical Society of South Africa, 1978.
- Certificate of Merit, South African Association for the Advancement of Science, 1980.
- Gold Medal of the South African Veterinary Association, 1982.
- DVSc (*honoris causae*) from the University of Pretoria for exceptional teaching skills, 1986.

The following tribute to him was paid by a former student, Dr Bernard Hurwitz, who is at present a private practitioner in Israel:

*Boompie, you were my friend, my beacon of hope, my mentor. The year was 1971 when we first met. I was a frightened and overwhelmed 2nd-year student, hopelessly defeated by the incomprehensible and fathomless subject of animal anatomy. All was lost for me. In you, however, I found faith in myself, and the confidence to go on. Your kind and gentle understanding of my confusion, your patience and tolerance of my ignorance, your unpretentious and modest manner, giving credit even where perhaps credit was not fully due, but always inviting our confidence and participation.*

*How I loved and admired your unbounded enthusiasm, your tremendous interest in every subject under the sun, your fascination with nature, biology and the miracle of life, and your excitement and expertise in demonstrating to us how teratogenic errors occur as part of that process.*

*You were kind, caring and compassionate. You brought out the best in us. You shared your wonder of the universe with us and infected us with your enthusiasm. You were our teacher and we loved you.*

*Boompie, you will be sorely missed and always remembered for your outstanding contribution to our profession as a whole as well as individually, to each of us, in our own personal lives.*

**Malie Smuts**

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