Alban Avelino John Barros D’Sa

Sonia H Barros D’Sa, Ian J Barros D’Sa

Consultant surgeon Walsgrave Hospital, Coventry, and St Cross Hospital, Rugby (b 1937; q Bristol 1967; MRCS, FRCS Ed, FRCS Eng), died from bronchopneumonia on 24 January 2015.

Alban Avelino John Barros D’Sa was born in Nairobi, Kenya, to a Goan Catholic family. The family later moved to Kisumu, a port on Lake Victoria, where Alban was educated and completed his O level examinations in December 1953.

Alban had an ambition to become a doctor from the age of only 5. However, the economic circumstances of his family were such that he was not able to pursue this passion initially, but, doing what he believed in above all, he placed his family above his own needs. Rather than to pursue his dream, he therefore went to Nairobi Teacher Training College after his O levels and started working as a teacher at the age of 18 years and one month—to keep the family afloat. He started supporting his parents immediately, and he cared for his mother until she died at age 89 in 1998. He supported his brothers and sisters through their education, including two brothers who were studying in Britain; this was made more difficult as his own father was unable to continue working.

After five years of teaching, and only after his brothers and sisters had completed their studies, Alban was finally able to pursue his own, still cherished, dream of studying medicine. His determination and passion to become a doctor were such that he was prepared to negotiate any obstacle. UK medical schools insisted on a second language at O level, which he did not have: so, while he was applying to do A levels, he also studied for O level Latin in Nairobi, which he did from scratch in just five months. He arrived in London in 1960 to do A levels at West Ham College, University of London, where he was soon elected treasurer to the union council, and was founder president of the biological society.

In 1962 he realised his dream by starting to study medicine at Bristol University Medical School, thus reaching a huge milestone in his life. He maintained himself throughout university, paying the substantial university fees expected from overseas students. He did this by spending his holidays working night shifts at a Batchelors pea factory and cleaning machinery in board mills.

He flourished socially, starting as founder president of the Kenyan students’ society of Bristol and West of England: he was elected vice president, and in his final year was elected as the first ever non-English president of Galenicals, the University of Bristol’s medical society.

He also excelled academically at medical school, winning prizes in surgery; obstetrics and gynaecology; ear, nose, and throat medicine; and ophthalmology. On graduating he was awarded the prestigious Brocklehurst prize—awarded to “the graduate of the year, who, in addition to having taken and passed all the professional MB ChB examinations in the university at the normal time, is considered to have made the best contribution to the life of the university, of the faculty, and of his or her fellow students.”

In 1967 he started work, first as surgical then as medical house officer at Bristol Royal Infirmary. He spent a year as a demonstrator in anatomy and then two years as a surgical senior house officer at Bristol Royal Infirmary, Southmead Hospital, and Frenchay Hospital. During his time at Frenchay Hospital, he worked under the internationally renowned thoracic surgeon Ronald Belsey, and this formed his enthusiasm for his later specialist interest in oesophageal surgery. He achieved fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in 1971.

In 1971 he also met his future wife, Gwenda Davies, a primary school teacher working in Bristol, just before moving to Taunton to work as a surgical registrar for three years. The couple were married in July 1972. Alban then worked as a Pfizer research fellow, tutor in surgery, and honorary senior registrar at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School and Hammersmith Hospital, London, for 18 months (where their daughter Sonia was born in 1974) and then went on to be senior registrar in general and vascular surgery from 1975 to 1979 at University Hospital of Wales, Cardiff (where their son Ian was born in 1976), and Singleton Hospital, Swansea. During those years, Alban started as he would go on to do throughout his life, working hard to combine a successful career in surgery with a happy marriage and family life.

Alban was appointed as a consultant surgeon in 1979 in Coventry and Rugby—a job that at the time involved working in four different hospitals. He started out as a specialist in all areas of general and vascular surgery, but as the fashion for increasing subspecialisation developed, he concentrated on laparoscopic, upper gastrointestinal, thyroid, and parathyroid surgery.

During his 23 years as a consultant he was known to colleagues, junior doctors, and hospital staff as a caring, astute, precise, and meticulous surgeon; a determined individual with a strong will and uncompromisingly high standards in all the arenas of life in which he engaged. He became an examiner in general surgery for the FRCS (and later MRCS) exam at the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in 1990.

Alban was one of the first wave of laparoscopic general surgeons in the UK after training with Joseph Petelin in Kansas, USA, and the first to introduce laparoscopic general surgery to Coventry and Warwickshire in 1990. He then became a tutor.
on, and later convenor of, laparoscopic surgery courses at the minimal access therapy training unit at RCS England.

In 1997 he was awarded FRCS *ad eundem* from the Royal College of Surgeons of England, and became an external consultant assessor to the health service ombudsman in 1999. At a more local level, he was also examiner in surgery for the universities of Leicester and Warwick, and surgical tutor for Rugby.

He later said that his proudest moments were attending the graduation ceremonies of his daughter, Sonia, in Cardiff in 1998, and his son, Ian, in Southampton in 1999, when both his children joined him in the medical profession.

Alban had more than his fair share of adversity during his career as a surgeon. However, his resilience was such that he fought long and hard through adversity, and he won on every occasion. He was never afraid to stand up and be counted, or to fight in defence of the principles he believed in. His first care was always his patients, to do his best for them, even at the risk of great personal sacrifice.

He retired from his NHS work on his 65th birthday in October 2002 but continued in private practice until 2008. He and his wife, Gwenda, were able to enjoy travelling and spending time with their children and two granddaughters.

During retirement, Alban experienced severe back pain, requiring several episodes of neurosurgical intervention and strong painkillers, on top of 20 years of autoimmune eosinophilic fasciitis requiring immunosuppression, but rarely did he complain, simply battling on with life as he always did.

In January 2015, after a short acute illness, Alban died while he was on holiday in Grenada, West Indies, with Gwenda. His funeral was held on 9 February at St Joseph the Worker Catholic Church, Coventry, which the family had attended for many years. Many of his former patients were present, as well as colleagues, friends, and family. He will be greatly missed by all who are left behind.

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