Phoebus Perdikis ("Fifi") died of a major stroke on June 3rd 2011. With his passing we not only lost one of the remaining giants of the “golden age” of surgery, when general surgery began to be firmly established as a specialty in South Africa, but also a colleague and dear friend to many.

He qualified M.B.B.Ch. at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1957 and after serving his housemanship proceeded to the United Kingdom, as was the custom at that time, to gain the F.R.C.S. He worked at Orpington Hospital as a registrar, and was so respected that the Chief of Surgery wanted him to stay.

He returned to South Africa in 1969 and worked at Baragwanath Hospital and the Johannesburg General Hospital before going into private practice. Although he was an academic at heart Phoebus responded to his ancestry by going into private practice at the request of the Greek community in Johannesburg. He was
subsequently a dedicated part-time surgeon attached to the Department of Surgery at Wits and became one of South Africa’s most well-known and esteemed surgeons. He worked until the time of his death and never took retirement. Phoebus was always a loyal supporter of the Department of Surgery and generated substantial research funds for the Department of Surgery from his association with the Freemasons. He participated unfailingly at the weekly meetings and ward rounds. His teaching sessions were inspirational and greatly appreciated by medical students and registrars. He was a regular examiner in surgery at the annual final MBBCh examinations. Before paediatric surgery became a separate specialty in South Africa he participated in the surgical care of children at the Children’s Hospital in Johannesburg. This was typical of his wide ranging interests.

In 1991 he arranged and directed the first laparoscopic surgical course in Johannesburg at the private Kenridge Hospital and encouraged the participation of academic surgeons and the attendance of sceptics. Later he was a founding member and president of the South African Society for Endoscopic Surgeons. He was an office holder of the Association of Surgeons of South Africa and was unbiased in his support of both “town” and “gown” in their deliberations.

Phoebus had an enquiring mind, some of his interests including the Medical Acute Abdomen and Paralytic Ileus leading to articles in American publications. Recently he wrote a review on AIDS and the Acute Abdomen.

At work his manner was that of complete dedication, honesty and respect, his compassion for his patients earning him a special reputation. Many of his patients became life-long friends. Ine, his wife, and Richardine, his daughter assisted him in his rooms. It was a happy family practice where patients received a warm welcome, frequently with the offer of refreshment. His motive for being in private practice was to serve his patients. This is exemplified by his very first patient encounter in his rooms at the conclusion of which the patient baffled Fifi by insisting on making an immediate payment for the service. Phoebus recounted that he excused himself from the room to ask for advice from Ine, his nurse/office manager, who also had never considered the finances of practice. Together they
came up with a nominal sum. When the patient was handed the bill he shook his head in disbelief and wrote a check for double the amount! Fifi later said that he immediately ran all the way to the bank to deposit the check. He was a great raconteur, often telling self-deprecatory stories such as when in empathy to an Afrikaans speaking lady with haemorrhoids he explained to her in his best taal that she had “verskriklike aarbei”!

Phoebus and Ine were always very generous in opening their home to others, entertaining the examiners in surgery each year. Those special evenings became a tradition of fun and friendship. They also grandly entertained surgeons visiting the Department of Surgery from overseas. Even years later we would hear from prominent surgeons around the world just how much they had enjoyed the hospitality in the Perdikis home during their South African visit.

Phoebus was a meticulous person and thorough in whatever he did. Rising consistently at 5am every day he spent these hours on his interests before going to work. A real renaissance man, his extra-curricular interests included philately, birding and architecture. He wrote an illustrated book on the forgeries of British stamps which is a definitive work and will be published in the UK. It was his idea to colour code bird books. He successfully collated and pasted drawings of thousands of birds from twelve copies of a popular bird book to confirm the concept resulting in a bestselling colour-coded book of South African birds. This idea of colour coding bird books has subsequently been adopted in Australia, the UK and the USA. He was a collector of many items including chess sets, model motor cars and figures of traditional people. He also designed his own home, “Aynsford”, which was subsequently built by his father-in-law. The design was based on a Tudor home which he had appreciated during his post-graduate training in England. His interest in architecture continued throughout his life and recently he had been busy writing a book on Cape gables. He had also compiled illustrations and plans of many Karoo homes.

In the late 1950’s he played professional soccer for the Corinthians team, and his enthusiasm for sport continued throughout his life.
He loved his family, his grandchildren having a special place in his heart. The doll house he built for his granddaughters with specially imported items illustrates his ingenuity and thoroughness. His son Galen follows his father’s example and is a plastic surgeon at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville, Florida, USA.

Phoebus touched many lives, made many friends, frequently gave advice and assistance to colleagues and was a true surgeon’s surgeon. Those who were close to him were privileged to have known such a person.

He leaves Ine, his loving and devoted wife of 49 years, his children Galen and Richardine and grandchildren Luke, Tatiana, Blake and Sasha. He will be sorely missed by us all.

C.G. Bremner
R. A. Hinder
G. Perdikis