

In Memoriam: Prof. dr. Georges Rolly

°Antwerp 29/01/1934

LUC DE BAERDEMAEKER M.D., PhD, DEAA,
LUC HERREGODS, M.D., PhD*¹University Hospital Ghent, Belgium, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences,
Department of Basic and Applied Medical Sciences, University Ghent, Belgium.*

On Tuesday, January 14th, 2025, the Belgian anaesthesiology community lost a highly esteemed physician, scientist, and person. Prof. dr. Georges Rolly, the first head of the Anaesthesia Department at Ghent University Hospital, passed away. He was a true pioneer in anaesthesiology, leaving a lasting legacy that reached across the globe, even as far as the Land of the Rising Sun.

Prof. Rolly completed his PhD at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden, where he conducted research on artificial ventilation using the Engström ER 311—the “Volvo” of anaesthesia machines. This was only one of many groundbreaking contributions he made throughout his career.

He was instrumental in several significant medical milestones: as anaesthesiologist he performed anaesthesia for Europe’s first lung transplant in 1968, alongside the late Prof. Fritz Derom. He introduced intravenous propofol anaesthesia in humans, working with Prof. Luc Herregods. Together with Prof. Linda Versichelen, he conducted pioneering research on the pharmacokinetics of volatile anaesthetics and high frequency ventilation. Their work contributed significantly to the safe use of volatile anaesthesia under environmentally friendly conditions of low fresh gas flow—well before the climate crisis became a global concern.

Prof. Rolly was a visionary, always ahead of his time. Anaesthesia was the first specialty in which, after a two-year inter-university AVU course, specialists-in-training were required to demonstrate their knowledge. He took on a leading role in the European academy of anaesthesiology. In the 1990s, he played a key role in the establishment of the European Diploma of Anaesthesia and Intensive Care. Thirty years later, the Flemish Recognition Committee made Part I of the European exam a mandatory component of training.

He recognized the potential of total intravenous anaesthesia with propofol early on. Alongside Prof. Mortier and Prof. Struys, he spearheaded research that put the Ghent School of Anaesthesia on the world map. Under his leadership, Prof. J. Van Aken earned his doctorate for his groundbreaking work on the effects of antihypertensives and anaesthetics on cerebral blood flow.

Many of us who trained under Prof. Rolly will remember him not only as a brilliant academic and visionary but also as an approachable, kind, and honest mentor. His most important advice, simple yet profound, was the essence of anaesthesia: “Be careful and give enough oxygen!”

After his retirement, his vision was carried forward by his successors, Prof. Eric Mortier and Prof. Patrick Wouters. It is a great honor for me to continue his work with the same ambition and integrity.

Prof. Rolly’s legacy lives on in the medical community and in the hearts of his family. May he rest in peace.

On behalf of many, we express our deepest gratitude and respect to Prof. dr. Georges Rolly.

*Luc De Baerdemaeker
Luc Herregods*