

New medical school will help ease chronic shortage of doctors in SA

PROFESSOR VIC EXNER

THIS WEEK Professor Derrick Swartz, vice-chancellor of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), announced that the institution has been given the go-ahead to establish a new medical school to serve the Eastern Cape and the country at large. The NMMU's goal is to be able to offer a full undergraduate medical degree (MBChB) by 2020 and further evolve to include medical specialist training by 2025.

The context of the new medical school is that the current training output of medical schools in the country is between 1 200 and 1 300 doctors a year, which is hopelessly too few.

The roll-out of National Insurance for all means the Department of Health alone

requires at least double this number. If we look at the latest figures for South Africa, we have nine doctors per 10 000 people compared to a country like Brazil, which has twice as many at 19 per 10 000.

To make matters worse, 75 percent of all doctors in South Africa are in the private sector – about 14 doctors per 10 000 people, which means that only 25 percent of doctors are in the public sector, which puts the figure at about 3.7 doctors per 10 000.

In the Eastern Cape, with a population of 6.56 million (Stats SA), there are only about 100 doctors and a small number of specialists, being produced by the province's only medical school, Walter Sisulu University in Mthatha.

Responding to provincial and national needs, the NMMU council decided in 2010 in favour of establish-

ing a medical school in Port Elizabeth, which has two large government hospitals, Livingstone (tertiary) and Dora Nginza (level 2).

Earlier this month, the Department of Higher Education formally approved the new medical school, which will help to serve the national health imperative of rolling out national health insurance for all South Africans.

We are fortunate to have a strong base from which to establish the medical school, using a building block approach that augments our Faculty of Health Sciences' current offerings. These include a diversity of professions: psychology, social work, environmental health, biomedical technology, sports sciences and biokinetics, pharmacy, radiography, nursing sciences, dietetics and emergency medical care.

Student numbers in the health sciences have been steadily growing, from about 2 800 in 2012 to 3 600 this year. The medical school offering will increase this exponentially.

The building-block approach being pursued in establishing a new medical school is a more affordable model, which incrementally adds medical undergraduate programmes to an existing faculty of health sciences and upgrades existing infrastructure belonging to the university and its broader clinical training platform (hospitals and clinics), with the assistance of the departments of Higher Education and Eastern Cape Health.

In 2020, the NMMU will accept its maiden group of first-year students, as well as a group of graduates from the new Bachelor of Public Health degree as well as from other Health Sciences programmes, who qualify for entry into the third-year level of our Graduate Entry Medical Programme (GEMP).

I visited a number of mid-income, developing countries, including India, Brazil and Mexico, which, like South Africa, need to approach best practice in Health Sciences Education and Health Services differently to developed countries.

Ethiopia, for example, has rolled out more than 10 new

medical schools in a few years using the building-block approach, where programmes are expanded and added incrementally as capacities and resources increase. Brazil has also embarked on a massive roll-out of new medical schools across their country, based on a similar model. NMMU's approach could serve as blueprint for a roll-out of more medical schools across South Africa in the future.

Our faculty encourages innovative thinking and a shift away from the traditional hierarchical approach of doctors seeing other health professionals as their servers rather than as fellow team members. Today, health professionals need to work as a transdisciplinary team in which all members respect their colleagues' role and input. The NMMU person

power and transdisciplinary respect between team members are emphasised from first year onward.

As part of our transdisciplinary approach, we are transforming the curriculum and by 2018 a number of foundation modules will be mandatory for all first-year students in the Health Sciences Faculty. This will include preventive health care, a re-engineered form of primary health care and conversational ability in an indigenous South African language – in the Eastern Cape it is isiXhosa.

Another key aspect of curriculum transformation is to decentralise teaching and training onto a broader training platform, where we take it out of the classroom and into the real world. Our new Zanele mobile clinic is already doing this by taking

groups of students and staff to the most needy communities in the greater Nelson Mandela Metro where they not only learn and deliver basic health services but also how to work together in multi-disciplinary teams.

From first year, the students will develop a keen social awareness and learn how to speak the same basic health-care language when caring for people, including sharing messages such as no smoking, no excessive drinking, sound nutrition and prevention is better than cure. It is all about caring for people with empathy and patience – what we call a good bedside manner – and ultimately delivering the best health care for all.

●Professor Vic Exner is executive dean, Faculty of Health Sciences, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

“
It's about treating
ill with a good
bedside manner
”