

The rural roots of the EC pulmonologist awarded an honorary doctorate by Nelson Mandela University this week run wide, deep and are life-giving, as Heather Dugmore discovered

Determined pursuit of excellence

“As a black person it was extremely difficult to become a doctor in South Africa a century ago when Nelson Mandela was born as there were no facilities to study here. This meant finding a way to study abroad,” says Professor Marina Xaba-Mokoena, a pulmonologist and pioneering health sciences academic who committed her career to helping people in the rural Eastern Cape.

She speaks with personal knowledge, as her father, the late Dr Rotoli Xaba, who qualified as a doctor in 1936, was the 23rd “non-white” person to become a doctor in South Africa, each one of them qualifying abroad.

“He was from Willowvale in the Eastern Cape, where I was born, and he managed to get his medical degree in Scotland through a bursary from the United Transkeian Territories General Council (UTTGC) known as the ‘Bunga,’” she explains.

Prof Xaba-Mokoena, who lives in East London and turns 80 this year, followed in his footsteps. She graduated as a general practitioner in 1973 from Stockholm University in Sweden, and went on to specialise in lung disease, becoming a pulmonologist.

She, too, achieved this on bursaries, initially training to be a nurse. After passing her final exams in nursing with honours, she received the SA Nursing Council gold medal for achieving the highest marks in the country.

This led to her being funded by the Bantu Welfare Trust of the Institute of Race Relations to receive orthopaedic nursing training in London, where she obtained the highest marks in the whole of England and Wales. Thereafter, she received a

scholarship to study medicine in Sweden and after six months of intensive training in the Swedish language, she began her medical studies.

“It wasn’t easy but we had to find a way as it was not unusual for people in our community to have these aspirations,” she explains. “There were a lot of educated, politically conscious people in Willowvale, which had good primary and secondary schools with excellent, politically conscious teachers and principals who produced top results.

“Many of us completed our schooling at Methodist boarding schools of which there were several in Transkei, including Healdtown near Fort Beaufort which I attended for five years and completed my matric there. Nelson Mandela also completed his matric there, as did a number of other South African leaders, including Robert Sobukwe, Govan Mbeki, Emeritus Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane and Reverend Seth Mokitimi who became the first black president of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa.

“The Methodist or missionary schools did a lot of good work as far as education is concerned and though they are rightly criticised for their role in colonialism, we received a quality education, which many did not. Regrettably, these schools were destroyed by the entry of Bantu Education when many of the teachers and principals were expelled and several went into exile.”

In her matric year, Prof Xaba-Mokoena’s father died. He never saw his wish fulfilled of seeing one of his children taking after him and working as a doctor in rural Transkei. Financially, his death put



PEOPLE'S PULMINOLOGIST: Professor Marina Xaba-Mokoena Picture: SUPPLIED

huge strain on the family and Prof Xaba-Mokoena’s maths teacher, a Miss Blunsom, paid for her fees to the end of her first year BSc at Fort Hare.

Healdtown matriculants typically studied at what was then called Fort Hare University College.

Hard work and determination put Prof Xaba-Mokoena at the top of her classes. “I wanted to prove to myself and everyone else that you can succeed at whatever you really want to do, and I was fortunate to have a great motivator in my mother, Mildred Xaba (née Mvambo). She

was a primary school teacher and a leader in the church, the Girl Guides and the Women’s Zenzele (‘Do It Yourself’) Association, with its motto ‘Lift as you rise’.

“Zenzele was all about motivating women to do things for themselves, to make their own money and to live healthy lifestyles. Inter alia, they grew vegetables, sewed garments to sell, such as wedding dresses and church uniforms, baked and made soap and candles. My mother was always busy and would work until midnight if she needed to complete something. I have inherited this; if I

have something to do, I will continue until it is done.”

Something Prof Xaba-Mokoena knew she had to do was to specialise in lung disease and to open the first faculty of medicine and health sciences at the then University of Transkei (Unitra), now Walter Sisulu University.

Her specific pursuit of lung disease started when her husband, economist PE Mokoena, developed asthma and she wanted to thoroughly understand its cause. This led her to into the world of lung diseases, including asthma, asbestosis, pneumonia and TB – a major cause of death in South Africa, compounded by HIV.

“I knew I could help people with these diseases and in 1980 I started working as a pulmonologist in the Transkei at Mthatha General Hospital,” says Prof Xaba-Mokoena. She was appointed as the hospital’s principal specialist in 1982, and, in 1983, the International Union against Tuberculosis appointed her as a member of the Scientific Committee on Respiratory Diseases.

“I formed the Transkei National TB Association, the local counterpart of the SA National Tuberculosis Association (SANTA). We organised international conferences and made sure the most effective TB drugs were made available to treat in Transkei.

“We also introduced effective patient management approaches such as DOT – Directly Observed Therapy – where a family member, health worker or community volunteer is appointed to observe the patient taking their medicine every day. I saw such an encouraging decline in TB until HIV hit and then it rose again. As we know, these diseases are compounded by socioeconomic

predicament, which many people in our country face.

“On the positive side, many diseases are preventable at relatively low cost, and people must be educated about this. Many diseases are also treatable. An infection like TB, if caught early, can be cured. Thus, when we founded the faculty of medicine and health sciences at Unitra in 1985, we chose to focus on primary healthcare and disease prevention rather than predominantly on curative medicine.

“The basic philosophy of this medical education is to raise the standards of healthcare for all people and for medical training to address the needs of the community it serves,” explains Prof Xaba-Mokoena who remained with the university until 1994.

Her subsequent posts included serving as the medical superintendent, specialist chest physician and chief physician at the Duncan Village Day Hospital in East London, and as chief physician and consulting principal specialist at the East London Hospital Complex where she worked until 2013 when she retired at the age of 75.

“Throughout my career I have emphasised the need to promote disease prevention and health promotion in all our communities, and I am delighted the executive dean of the health sciences faculty at Nelson Mandela, paediatric cardiologist Professor Lungile Pepeta, is doing this.”

Prof Pepeta, who did his medical degree at Unitra has chosen to place equal emphasis on health promotion, disease prevention, treatment and rehabilitative medicine in the development of the curriculum for the new medical school at NMU – the tenth in South

Africa.

“This approach is spot on,” says Prof Xaba-Mokoena. “So many diseases are non-communicable, lifestyle diseases, such as high blood pressure, obesity and diabetes, and we need to educate people about how to avoid or manage them and how to keep their immune system strong, which makes them more resistant to infection and helps them to live a longer, healthier life.

“My parents died in their fifties and most of my seven siblings died before the age of 50, as high blood pressure and diabetes is very prevalent in my family. When I turned 38 I developed very high blood pressure and so when I made it to 50 I had a big celebration, and here I am at 80!”

Still highly active, Prof Xaba-Mokoena is the national president of the SA Medical Association, she continues to write articles for the SA Medical Journal, is a lay preacher in the Methodist Church and recently authored her memoir titled *Dream Fulfilled*.

Her secret for longevity is “determination and a healthy lifestyle”. She goes to gym and hydrotherapy several times a week, she stopped eating sugar years ago, and she is careful not to eat a lot of fatty or fast foods.

“It has made a huge difference to my blood pressure and general health,” she says. “This doesn’t mean I haven’t had health issues. I have, but I’m still going strong. It is my greatest joy to be bestowed with the honour of this honorary doctorate during my lifetime, and to see so many health sciences students graduating from this wonderful university named after Nelson Mandela.”

● The Dispatch will feature more of these women achievers next week