



Rewriting

the challenged-hospital script

DR RUST THERON
Distinguished Visitor Award
 University of Stellenbosch

Experienced clinicians to visit the Dr Harry Surtie Hospital to support clinical governance, implement systems as well as to develop and train local staff.

If ever there was a potential illustration of how one carefully placed veteran specialist physician can help turn things around, then the beleaguered 327-bed Dr Harry Surtie Hospital in Upington, is a blank test canvass. The project is part of broader support of the relatively isolated Northern Cape hospital by the University of Stellenbosch Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, spearheaded by the Ukwanda Centre for Rural Health, under the leadership and guidance of Professor Ian Couper.

As a Distinguished Visitor, Durbanville specialist internist, Dr Rust Theron, will conduct bi-monthly two-day visits to the regional hospital. The nearest tertiary hospital is in Kimberley, over 400km away, with Cape Town almost double the distance. With just 30 doctors spread unevenly across departments, Dr Harry Surtie Hospital has two medical officers running an orthopaedic department and a cataract elective surgery waiting list approaching the 400 mark. The Surgery Department has two Community Service doctors under a single surgeon.

High mortality rate

Perhaps most tellingly, the hospital's bed usage rate is 81%, with 2 542 admissions and 454 deaths in the 2017/2018 financial year. Dr Theron's impending intermittent tenure over 18 months from July 2019 is already raising hopes and morale. Dr Wentzel willingly became point man for the collaboration with the Ukwanda Centre that sees some 30 University of Stellenbosch medical students rotating annually through all the disciplines at Dr Harry Surtie Hospital. The Ukwanda Centre also sends allied healthcare professionals there, and from August 2019, six Cuban-trained South African medical students will also complete a 15-week primary healthcare rotation that will include the referral community-based clinics in the area.

Professor Couper says, "The primary goal for Dr Theron is to fill the gap in Internal Medicine, although they also have big gaps in orthopaedics and ophthalmology, for instance. The big challenge is the number of district hospitals and clinics that refer into Dr Harry Surtie Hospital." He says University of Stellenbosch and Ukwanda have a long association with the hospital and the current initiative came from a visit by two Vice Deans and Professor Couper in January 2018. "We discussed the possibility of doing training and then followed up in May last year with a multi-specialist visit from our medical faculty, including occupational therapists, physiotherapists, a speech-therapist and a group of us from Ukwanda," he says.

He says Ukwanda's experience is that medical students respond well to working in small hands-on teams at district hospitals. As part of this new approach, Ukwanda sent four medical students to Dr Harry Surtie Hospital for the entire year with online and conferencing support from Tygerberg Academic Hospital and Ukwanda, to fill the on-site consultant gaps. There are plans to upscale student numbers from next year.

Plugging the service gaps

He says Dr Rust Theron's bi-monthly two-day visits to Dr Harry Surtie Hospital is all about filling the current service gaps with indications that Community Service applicants for the coming year are already showing increased interest, "because they see something is happening here".

Dr Wentzel says there are 10 Commserve officers at Dr Harry Surtie Hospital, but that over the years the allocation has varied widely, with just five arriving in 2018. Professor Couper says that Dr Theron will also deal with the more difficult cases and help solve diagnostic conundrums, while training the medical team and auditing poor outcomes and the dismal mortality numbers.

"We're hoping to eventually get Dr Harry Surtie Hospital re-accredited for internship and in future perhaps do some post-graduate training there," Professor Couper adds. Dr Wentzel said Professor Couper helped push the Distinguished Visitor application because of the service needs that go beyond the University's mandate and resources. "The students being trained here may spread the word – it's exciting to those of us that want to do further teaching, degrees and write up articles. The daily functioning of the Internal Medicine Department will improve, if medical officers who want to do Internal Medicine hear that there's this great internal physician coming every two months. I want to help this hospital serve as it's supposed to. It covers a vast area and one of my five-year goals is to get internship accreditation to improve learning for juniors," he adds. He's now got some deep experience and wisdom behind his dream through support from Dr Rust Theron.

Distinguished Visitor to make impact at Upington hospital

Dr Theron, who from January 2014 helped pioneer the training of medical students in private practice at the Durbanville Medi-Clinic where he's based, holds an MPhil degree in Health Professions Education, having graduated cum-laude in MMed (Internal Medicine) from University of Stellenbosch in 1995. He's a respected physician with a research portfolio, ranging from diabetes, cardiology and gastroenterology to hypertension. He will assess the situation at the hospital before prioritising areas to address, whether it be teaching during ward rounds, workshops or clinic visits. Says on-site paediatrician, Dr Brad Wentzel, "We're very grateful to University of Stellenbosch, Discovery Foundation and Dr Theron for this intervention – it's going to make a huge difference."

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