

Plans for the NWU Medical School on track

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The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the enormous stress and burden placed on South Africa's medical professionals have dramatically strengthened the North-West University's case for a medical school in North West.

Official NWU documents suggest that despite competing interests and financial pressures due to Covid-19, the pandemic has highlighted the need for the facility.

"This is a matter that we will continue to pursue because we strongly believe that the new NWU Medical School would address the needs of prospective students and the public in terms of enrolment opportunities and public health in our country," remarks the NWU Council chairperson, Dr Bismark Tyobeka, after the recent Council meeting on 18 March 2021.

The NWU's Medical School Task Team, also led by Dr Tyobeka, was established to investigate the case for a medical school at the university. The other task team members are Prof. Dan Kgwadi (NWU vice-chancellor and principal), Prof. Awie Kotzé (Dean: NWU Faculty of Health Sciences), Prof. Andrew Robinson (Deputy Dean: Strategy and Business Development in the same faculty) and Mr Terry Wickham (consultant from Healthcare Initiatives).

In its latest report, the task team stated that the next steps would be to secure urgent meetings with the North West premier, the provincial Department of Health, the national Department of Health and the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Dr Bonginkosi Blade Nzimande. A meeting took place with the North West provincial leadership on Friday, 26 March 2021, during which a joint task team was established.

"We remain optimistic about the opportunities for collaboration and support from key stakeholders at national and provincial level," Dr Tyobeka adds, indicating the governing body's support for the task team's plans to lobby for the urgent establishment of the NWU Medical School.

The possibility of establishing a medical school was mooted as long ago as 2006, but it was only in 2017 that planning moved into high gear. Once final approval is granted by the relevant authorities, the NWU will become the 11th university medical school in the country.

Earlier this year the focus was on the Nelson Mandela University after its launch of the 10th and newest medical school in South Africa. Located in the Eastern Cape, the university announced it was looking forward to welcoming its first cohort of medical students. Only 50 places were available, but over 3,500 applications had been received, highlighting the exceptionally high demand for medical training at the very limited number of medical schools in the country.

With the announcement of the opening of the new medical school in the Eastern Cape, the high cost of operating such a school came under the spotlight. However, the medical fraternity and societal formations appear to agree that the need for trained medical staff, particularly doctors, far outweighs the costs of setting up and operating medical schools.

Moreover, the NWU has crafted a unique and compelling value proposition in their planning for the proposed new NWU Medical School that would see the typical establishment and operating costs slashed without any sacrifice in terms of quality of training and eventual outcome.

In addition, an NWU-hosted webinar last year highlighted the dire need for the annual production of qualified medical personnel, especially medical doctors. This dire situation has only worsened due to the current Covid-19 pandemic.

Given the ever-growing demand for medical professionals, the NWU is clearly on track to fill an urgent need not only in North West, but in South Africa and the region as a whole.

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