

Stevie the robot joins intensive-care team at UP Faculty of Health Sciences and Steve Biko Academic Hospital

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The [Faculty of Health Sciences](#) at the University of Pretoria (UP) and Steve Biko Academic Hospital have welcomed Stevie, a mobile robot that will help improve the treatment of patients during the COVID-19 pandemic. This will be done through instant live discussion and communication daily between German and South African intensive-care unit (ICU) teams.

Stevie, which works at Steve Biko Academic Hospital's ICU and is named after Biko, one of the most prominent leaders during South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle, will be vital in allowing for a bedside ward round attended by ICU teams across the globe. According to Professor Tiaan de Jager, Dean of UP's Faculty of Health Sciences, "Telemedicine plays a crucial role in encouraging long-distance patient and clinician care. COVID-19 has been a massive disruptor in society, especially in the healthcare sector."

COVID-19 has inspired the healthcare sector to rethink its current systems and how they can be more efficient, he said. This initiative is an interdisciplinary global telemedical collaboration between the Faculty of Health Sciences, the Department of Critical Care at Steve Biko Academic Hospital, the Enhanced Recovery after Intensive Care (ERIC)-Tele ICU at Charité Medical University in Berlin, and the Robert Koch Institute.

"The Faculty takes pride in responding to the demands of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR), which can aid patient care, enhance teaching and learning experience for students and support the University in conducting research that matters, thus leaving a positive impact on society," Prof de Jager said. "We are grateful to our collaborators and colleagues for ensuring that telemedicine can take centre stage and help us combat COVID-19."

The gender-neutral Stevie is the second robot to be employed by UP, following [Libby, the robotic library assistant who arrived in 2019](#). "Stevie is now officially the much adored baby of our ICU team and is stimulating much excitement throughout the hospital," said Professor Fathima Paruk, Academic and Clinical Head of the Department of Critical Care at UP and Steve Biko Academic Hospital.

Stevie has a privacy handset which is a live phone to aid confidential communication during ward rounds; a stethoscope port where it can remotely relay information while a patient is being examined, and it enables visualisation of detail for

close-up diagnosis and patient care oversight with high-definition pan-tilt-zoom cameras.

“ICU specialists and their teams based in Germany at the CU and RKI will join the South African ICU team in person through the robot’s digital screen,” Prof Paruk said. “Both the SA and German teams, led by ICU specialists, will be able to interact virtually. This will enable the team from Germany to see the patient, look at the ICU monitors, and engage in discussions with patients. The ward round will involve discussing the medical condition and include a management plan over a secure line.”

Prof Paruk added that Stevie will be used for the benefit of all ICU patients – COVID-19 patients and all others – as well as for exchange of ideas, specialist training, global collaborations, webinars and educational workshops, and especially for highly selective or niche specialties in critical care. Specialists will also be able to remotely advise upon and guide a bedside procedure.

Prof Paruk explained that in the context of clinical healthcare medicine, evidence garnered from this collaboration has the potential to inform and shape future practices in South Africa’s local critical-care setting, “considering that we struggle with a shortage of intensivists and ICU beds in South Africa”.

Telemedicine is the future, and the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated this, said Dr Evgeniya Boklage, Country Relations Officer for the Centre for International Health Protection at the Robert Koch Institute. “We are happy as the Robert Koch Institute continues to support our clinical partners at the Charité Medical University to help connect them with their colleagues at the University of Pretoria. We look forward to the exchange of experiences because each country has a different reality, which can bring forth various opportunities to learn from one another and improve patients’ lives.”

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