

Reaching out to save young lives in rural areas

Issued by [University of the Free State](#)

5 Oct 2021

Professor Stephen Brown, principal specialist in the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of the Free State (UFS), and his team are taking life-saving medical care to young patients in the rural parts of the Free State.

Paediatric heart specialists hope that an outreach initiative started back in 2016, allowing them to travel to rural areas in the Free State to diagnose heart defects in babies early, would grow and expand to other rural areas and provinces.



Prof. Stephen Brown

Every year, more than 40 babies in the rural areas of South Africa may die as a result of an undiagnosed heart lesion, because everyone assumes that they have respiratory problems when they actually have critical congenital heart disease – up to 85% of which is curable, says [Prof. Stephen Brown](#), principal specialist and head of the Division of Paediatric Cardiology in the [Department of Paediatrics and Child Health](#) in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of the Free State (UFS).

Prof. Brown, who is also a paediatric cardiologist at the Universitas Academic Hospital, says a life-saving collaboration initiative between the UFS, the [Mother and Child Academic Hospital \(MACAH\) Foundation](#), and the [Discovery Fund](#) started five years ago to help curb the death of young patients due to congenital heart disease, and to make services more accessible to rural communities.

Hundreds of patients seen annually

“We initiated an outreach programme due to the fact that some patients found it difficult to get transport to our central hospital. Since the Free State is considered rural, there are long distances to travel. Our concept was that we should take the service to grass-roots level to make it more convenient for the parents and caretakers.

“We partnered with MACAH, and since early detection of congenital heart disease makes a big difference, it fits in nicely with MACAH's first 1,000 days drive. Due to the hard work of Mrs Tertia de Bruyn, we were given the opportunity to come into contact with Discovery. Dr Daniel Buys (UFS Department of Paediatrics and Child Health) and Mr Rudolph Pretorius (echocardiography technician) did a lot of the initial paperwork and motivation,” says Prof. Brown.

According to him, a mobile echocardiography apparatus was donated by the Discovery Foundation via MACAH, which is crucial for doing this outreach work. The machine looks like a laptop and can be transported in a carry case.

“We see 170-250 patients on an annual basis. The service is obviously confined to secondary hospitals, and we started doing the Mofumahadi Manapo Mopeli Hospital in Qwaqwa and the Bongani Regional Hospital in Welkom. It has since expanded to the Dihlabeng Regional Hospital (Bethlehem) and the Pelonomi Secondary Hospital in Bloemfontein. Since initiation in 2020, Pelonomi has seen on average 40 children per month receiving a heart sonar. Covid-19 has had a major impact on our work,” says Prof. Brown.

First 1,000 days in any child's life determine their trajectory for life

Prof. André Venter, chairman of the MACAH Foundation, says one of the main commitments of the MACAH Foundation in central South Africa is their passionate belief that the first 1,000 days in any child's life determine their trajectory for life. Says Prof. Venter: “We should do everything in our power to ensure that this 1,000-day journey is as optimal for each child, including conception, pregnancy, birth, and health during the first two years of life.”

“As chairman of the MACAH Foundation, I am sincerely grateful to pioneers such as Prof. Brown and his team in Paediatric Cardiology for their excellent outreach initiative, but also to the Discovery Fund who shared our vision and that of Prof. Brown’s team and was willing to make this very generous donation. I am so proud of and so grateful to all of you,” says Prof. Venter.

According to him, this has not only helped to make infant cardiac screening in the rural areas a reality, but also to make it a world-class service.

The importance of the partnership for rural areas

Prof. Brown says in his experience, this initiative is greatly appreciated, as he and Dr Buys do the clinics and heart sonars personally. “The families find this fantastic, since they can have direct interaction with their cardiologist, which allows for better communication and adds a personal touch. When they come to Bloemfontein for further assessment – their faces light up when seeing a familiar face.

“It also helps with treatment and management at their local institution. I also find that the doctors in the hospitals appreciate it tremendously – they find it easier to phone and ask for advice. It brings the ‘fancy tertiary physicians’ to a human level with whom they can interact. It also alleviates a lot of stress for the physicians, and they can show/ask advice re difficult cases,” says Prof. Brown.

By doing outreach, Prof. Brown concludes, they have learned so much about the communities and the importance of being accessible, as patients appreciate having direct interaction with the professor. The doctors and staff have also been enthusiastic and supported them tremendously at all the hospitals. The students from Cuba have joined Prof. Brown and his team when visiting their hospitals, and they can spend some dedicated clinical teaching time together.

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University of the Free State

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