

Recognising the bedrock of the global healthcare system

While doctors play an instrumental role in the success of the hospital environment by making key decisions pertaining to patient medical diagnoses and treatment, nurses are another important cog in the healthcare wheel, and are often the unsung and under-appreciated heroes of the medical world.



Source: 123RF

Providing over 90% of global healthcare, nurses are crucial to primary healthcare and most often represent the frontline of patient and facility relations.

Their roles are far-reaching, providing patient care and support, educating the public about illnesses and diseases, and even advocating for health interventions. Overall, the nursing profession has evolved far beyond what it was at conception.

According to Pfizer South Africa medical director, Dr Bha Ndungane-Tlakula, it is important to acknowledge the role of nurses in today's healthcare system, particularly as the world pays homage to the nursing profession on 12 May, International Nurses Day and the anniversary of the birth of Florence Nightingale.

"Revered as the founder of modern nursing, Nightingale embodied what modern-day nursing entails and her principles have led to more structured nursing practices worldwide," explains Ndungane-Tlakula.

Covid-19: the industry disruptor

In South Africa, the role of nurses and their importance was placed in the spotlight more than ever before as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the country's increasingly strained healthcare system. It also exposed South Africa's shortage of professional nurses in the system and highlighted the need for nurses in both public and private healthcare facilities.

Notably, South Africa's 2030 Human Resources for Health Strategy suggests that if no substantial action is taken now, by 2025, the country will face a shortage of around 34,000 registered nurses. Given that there were only 71,707 registered professional nurses in 2019 in the country and that 47% of registered nurses will have retired in the next 15 years - owing to the retirement age for the profession being set at 65 - solutions to the healthcare shortage must be addressed now to

ensure a sustainable future.

Addressing the shortage of medical personnel

“The shortage of healthcare professionals and its impact on healthcare delivery in the rural parts of South Africa has long been a topic of discussion, and with 32.65% of the South African population residing in rural areas, at Pfizer, we made the decision to partner with innovative nurse-led programmes such as Unjani Clinics Network to address the shortage,” adds Ndungane-Tlakula.



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Tony Singleton 6 Dec 2021



The Pfizer Foundation is a charitable organisation established by Pfizer Inc. It is a separate legal entity from Pfizer Inc. with distinct legal restrictions. With a network of 111 professional black female nurse-owned clinics, the initiative, funded through The Pfizer Foundation’s Global Health Innovation Grants programme, provides quality, affordable and accessible primary healthcare to underserved communities in South Africa, and aims to empower these nurses, create permanent employment, and develop a sustainable clinic model for providing primary healthcare in often rural areas.

Success is a team effort

“The collaboration between Pfizer South Africa, The Pfizer Foundation and Unjani Clinics dates back to 2016 and funding has been allocated annually since then,” says Ndungane-Tlakula.

“The initiative has seen great success, particularly as more than 84% of the South African population are dependent on the already overburdened public healthcare system.”

The partnership has led to the funding and establishment of eight clinics in total, five on behalf of Pfizer South Africa and three from The Pfizer Foundation. Furthermore, as all Unjani Clinic facilities are nurse-owned, the partnership has empowered eight nurses to own their healthcare facilities and created permanent employment for 31 community members.

The eight clinics have, to date, provided more than 136,247 consultations to the communities within which they operate.

“In addition, a basic ultrasound programme was introduced in 2017 and 2018, in which 57 clinics in the Unjani Clinic Network received ultrasound equipment and the necessary training to provide affordable sonar services to confirm pregnancy and determine gestational age,” adds Ndungane-Tlakula. “Since then, basic ultrasound services have become a standard practice at all Unjani Clinic facilities and over 90,000 ultrasounds have been recorded.”



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The initiative also provides training programmes to empower “nursepreneurs” with the skills to become successful businesswomen, with one nurse, Sister Molly Segobola, who owns a clinic in Hammanskraal, having graduated from the Unjani Clinic five-year Enterprise Development programme in 2021.

Additionally, as many as 13 leaders from the YES programme - a joint venture between government and the private sector - are deployed across Unjani Clinic’s Pfizer facilities, with three taking part in the Health Promotion Officer Learnership programme through the TDI.

A track record of substantial funding raised

Lynda Toussaint, chief executive officer at Unjani Clinics, applauds Pfizer’s efforts to bolster community healthcare through the Unjani Clinic initiative, stating that, to date, as much as R12.9m in funding has been allocated to the cause.

“The partnership with Pfizer has provided us with very necessary funding to try and bridge the gap between the often, ineffective facilities in several impoverished communities, and quality medical services and medical interventions. We are thankful for their generosity and commitment and look forward to many more years of improving access to affordable healthcare in communities across South Africa,” she says.

Initiatives such as Unjani Clinics would only be possible with the dedication of professional nurses, and as the bedrock of the healthcare system, it’s imperative that society recognise their importance.

“Nurses do more than merely look after patients while on treatment; they save lives. As the largest profession in the healthcare sector, it is important to increase the number of nurses in the country by recognising their importance and empowering them to ensure a vastly improved South African healthcare system for future generations,” says Ndungane-Tlakula.

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