

Netcare to sponsor South Africa's first Chair of Emergency Medicine

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The Health Sciences Faculty at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) has announced that medical training in emergency healthcare is set to receive a major boost via a R2.5 million sponsorship from private healthcare organisation, Network Healthcare Holdings Limited (Netcare).

Netcare's R2.5 million sponsorship will facilitate the creation of the country's - and indeed the continent's - first Division and Chair of Emergency Medicine (or Professorship) over a period of five years. The Chair will be based at Wits, Johannesburg, and will be known as the 'Netcare Chair of Emergency Medicine.'

Says Professor Errol Holland, Head of the School of Clinical Medicine at the Faculty of Health Sciences at Wits: "To date, South African institutions have not offered official, specialist training in the field of Emergency Medicine. The Division will introduce a new medical speciality which will bring South Africa in line with leading institutions elsewhere in the world."

The establishment of the first Chair is part of the Faculty of Health Sciences' plan to create a Division of Emergency Medicine within the Department of Family Medicine. Over time, it is envisaged that this new Division will emerge into a fully-fledged department.

At present, the care in Casualty Units is administered through the efforts of medical practitioners who have not had the benefit of specific training in emergency medicine. "Despite the lack of official training, the majority of these professionals do a sterling job. Emergency Medicine is the most important aspect of care yet it receives the least attention and the standards vary widely. Care provided in Casualties may also be compromised due to a shortage of equipment. This does not win the confidence of the general public," says Holland.

Commenting on the initiative, Netcare's chief operating officer, Dr Richard Friedland says: "Since inception, the Netcare group has focussed on trauma and emergency medicine through its Accident, Emergency and Trauma Units, Medicross Family Medical and Dental Centres and private emergency medical service, Netcare 911. Given South Africa's alarming incidence of trauma, personal assault and motor vehicle accidents, medical professionals in the field of Emergency Medicine should have access to the best possible training and education.

"Internationally, Wits has distinguished itself as one of the leading medical training centres of excellence and, in supporting this initiative, Netcare is able to re-invest in training, education and skills development in South Africa. Through this project, the group is able to give back to the broader community and make a meaningful contribution to the lives of all South Africans."

Emergency Medicine is one of the fastest-growing medical disciplines across the globe. Unfortunately, those currently working in a Casualty Unit in South Africa feel they are poorly rewarded and have no future scope for career growth.

The first Division and Chair in Emergency Medicine is set to change this. Spearheading Emergency Medicine excellence in South Africa, the objective of the new Division is to train specialists in the first contact care (or first points of medical contact such as General Practitioners and Casualty Units) of emergencies within various medical disciplines. In short, the first Division and Chair will endeavour to:

1. Devise excellent, best practice standards of treatment and management protocols;
2. Develop training programmes that will be consistent throughout all Casualty Units. Training will be developed for undergraduates and registrars at a postgraduate level;

3. Via data stemming from research, provide a rational service in first contact care throughout the healthcare system; and
4. Fully integrate the Division of Emergency Medicine into the entire Faculty programme.

Ultimately, the aim is for every Casualty Unit in the public and private sector to be staffed by emergency medicine specialists, thereby contributing to a decrease in mortality rates in critical situations (mortality rates have dropped by up to 20% in other parts of the world as a result of the implementation of similar initiatives).

Training programmes offered will match standards practised at leading institutions elsewhere in the world. In addition to providing general training in the field of Emergency Medicine, special areas of focus will include doctors in the pre-hospital care environment; instructing Casualty doctors in the management of critically ill children, particularly with regard to cases involving poisoning; and treating disorders, especially those that are life-threatening eg. asthma.

Training on how to manage traumas resulting from physical assault and motor vehicle accidents which require swift intervention will be included. According to Holland, head injuries are the leading cause of death in motor vehicle accidents and training in neurosciences is therefore an essential component.

The initial intention is to introduce the training programmes at the major teaching hospitals: Johannesburg General, Chris Hani Baragwanath, Helen Joseph and Coronation Hospitals. A unit will also be established at the Wits University Donald Gordon Medical Centre.

Emergency Medicine will be recognised as a full specialty by the Health Professions Council of South Africa, with areas of responsibility and the scope of the training programme being clearly defined. It is envisaged that interested medical officers will enter into registrar training and be formally assessed through specialist examinations or through Wits' Masters in Emergency Medicine degrees, says Holland.

"Elevating the level of care in the Emergency Medicine environment will significantly enhance our ability to manage national disasters. This initiative marks an appropriate public-private partnership between Netcare and Wits in that it addresses one of the bio-socio-economic health priorities of the country - it aims to limit serious outcomes in trauma-ridden communities.

"This endeavour is thus in keeping with the strategic planning objectives adopted by the Wits University community," says Holland.

The Senate of Wits has approved the establishment of the first Division and Chair of Emergency Medicine and subject to ratification by the University Council, the process of selection will be organised. The academic programme will be put into operation soon after the professorial appointment is made in August.

Dr Jack Shevel, chief executive officer of Netcare, said that investing in the training of doctors in Emergency Medicine will have a positive, future impact on society. "The creation of this first Division and Chair is to the benefit of society and each and every South African. This initiative supports Netcare's objective of partnering with institutions such as Wits to ensure the delivery of world-class, safe medical care to South Africans. The Faculty of Health Sciences at Wits should be applauded for ensuring Emergency Medicine takes its rightful place on the medical map."

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