

# Discovery Health, Rhodes University to 'cure' health journalism

 [Bylssa Sikiti da Silva](#)

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Health journalism in South Africa is ailing and is in need of healing, Prof Guy Berger, Rhodes University head of school of journalism and media studies, said on Friday, 29 October 2010, in Sandton. He was speaking at the launch of the Discovery Centre for Health Journalism, which will from next year offer an honours degree with specialisation in health journalism at the Eastern Cape-based learning institution.

## Scholarships and short courses

The partnership will see Discovery Health spend R13 million over five years, offering 30 scholarships - six scholarships annually for five years, Bizcommunity.com was told.

The centre will also offer short courses for working health journalists to understand better issues relevant to health journalism, Discovery Health CEO Jonathan Broomberg said, in the hope that 'curing' health journalism and promoting it intensively will raise the national debate on healthcare systems and improve the public's understanding of health issues.

In a continent where health reporting, like environmental reporting, is seen as a boring beat and more often omitted from the editorial agenda, most news organisations - many of them resources-strained - devote most of their tight budget on political reporting, as news editors seek to hold dictators, political thieves, demagogues and enemies of free press to account.

## Three pressing reasons

However, Berger attributed the media's 'estranged' attitude towards health reporting to three pressing reasons - narrow news frame, limited capacity for story-telling and shortage of subject-knowledge.

Unpacking the narrow news frame, he said: "Too often, we are tied into the stereotype that the remit of journalism is events-coverage. That makes reporting politics pretty easy... But the kind of price we pay for this kind of focus, however, is a blindspot with regards to the zillions of aspects of life which do not constitute a news event."

Once again, the issue of lack of appropriate skills to tell stories came to the fore, as Berger deplored what he called 'lack of savvy' by too many journalists to turn complex information into compelling stories.

**"Not something we should overlook"**

"The limited creative capacity in health journalism is not something we should overlook. It is a cancer that can kill the creature."

As part of the spectrum of shortage of subject-knowledge, Berger lamented the grave lack of expertise in the complex subject material of health-related issues, especially in the areas of policy, economics, practices, science and technologies of the field.

"Not to mention journalistic ignorance of the ethics in health-care," he added.

### **Host symposiums**

The Discovery Centre for Health Journalism, which some observers are now hailing as the 'miracle prayer' that will kill the vampire currently sucking SA health journalism's blood, is planning to host symposiums on health journalism to bring together academics, media managers, journalists and post-graduate students.

The aim of these symposiums, Broomberg pointed out, is to debate key issues in health journalism, such as how to better cover HIV/Aids, the newer epidemics of obesity and diabetes, and healthcare economic models.

"We encourage those who have done journalism to apply for this course," Rhodes University's Prof Harry Dugmore said, adding that the course programme, as well as regular conferences, will help journalists deepen their understanding of health issues and equip them with tools to reflect on the practice of health journalism.

### **2010 Discovery Health Journalism Awards**

Furthermore, Discovery Health is calling on journalists to enter the 2010 Discovery Health Journalism Awards, the third edition of these annual awards. Health stories should have been published or broadcast in the period 1 January 2010 - 31 December 2010. For more information and how to enter, go to the [Discovery site](#).

The applications for admission to the 2011 media studies honours degree with a specialisation in health journalism will close at the end of November 2010.

For more information, contact Prof Dugmore on tel +27 (0)46 603 7136 or email him at [h.dugmore@ru.ac.za](mailto:h.dugmore@ru.ac.za).

### **ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA**

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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