

Covid-19 transforms lives of healthcare workers

In just a few short months, the Covid-19 pandemic has completely transformed the way that Limpopo healthcare workers go about their work and conduct their lives. But, they have adapted well to the changes that have been thrust upon them as a result of the virus.



Dr Rhulani Khosa and Dr Peters Mathebula

“We as healthcare workers were deeply concerned, and in some instances understandably scared when this pandemic first started making its presence felt in the country and our province. Now, however, we know much better what we are dealing with, the hospital was proactive in putting in place comprehensive measures and new work-flow systems to help safeguard healthcare workers, and we have quickly adapted to counter the threat to us. We know what is required to prevent the spread of the virus and this has effectively become second nature to us all. Now, when I go home after having worked in protective gear all day, I take a shower to disinfect myself before I even greet my wife and family,” says Dr Peters Mathebula, who runs the emergency department at Netcare Pholoso Hospital in Polokwane.

His colleague Dr Rhulani Khosa, says each patient who seeks medical assistance in the emergency department is now managed as if the patient were potentially Covid-19 positive, even if the patient may have come in for an unrelated condition, for example a broken leg.

New normal

“We’re always donning our protective gear and taking all necessary disinfection precautions. Furthermore, the nursing and other staff members also understand that the hospital and emergency department have their best interests at heart and will always take every possible precaution to keep them safe while they are at work. This has instilled considerable confidence in the hospital and the processes it has put in place following the Covid-19 outbreak.”

He says that the hospital has rearranged the scheduling of nurses working shifts so that nursing staff get sufficient rest. Their health, and that of everyone working at the hospital, is also closely monitored on a daily, ongoing basis through screening and testing where indicated. In addition, all nursing and other staff receive ongoing training in safeguarding themselves, their colleagues and patients during the Covid-19 pandemic.

“The pandemic has therefore become something that we take into account as a part of our everyday work; a ‘new normal’ if you will. Having adapted to these extraordinary circumstances we are well placed to deal with any contingencies that may arise in the province going forward,” adds Mathebula.

“The emergency department of Netcare Pholoso Hospital is the entrance point to the hospital for all emergency cases. With 12 isolation cubicles, four resuscitation bays and two decontamination cubicles, our emergency department is particularly well equipped. We are consequently able to consult our general patients in an isolation room, which can be easily decontaminated using state-of-the-art disinfecting robots and other disinfecting methods. We can also bring our mobile x-ray equipment into the isolation cubicles if necessary, and these can be effectively decontaminated after use.

“The hospital itself has been demarcated into special zones for the appropriate care of all patients, whether or not they have tested positive, are under investigation or have tested negative for Covid-19.”

Both Khosa and Mathebula grew up in Limpopo and elected to return to serve the communities of their home province once they had completed their studies. Khosa, who is married with two children, grew up in Elim near Louis Trichardt. Mathebula, who is married with three children, grew up in the small village of Jilongo in the Collins Chabane Municipality, Vhembe District, in the far north of Limpopo province near the Kruger National Park where, in those days, rogue lions from the park sometimes killed and ate their livestock, he recalls.

Asked how he came to choose emergency medicine as a career, Mathebula says: “I have always felt fulfilment in caring for people, particularly the sick and elderly. Once I finally achieved my dream of qualifying as a doctor, I wanted nothing more than to serve the communities of Limpopo.

Changing mindsets and behaviours

“We are seeing larger numbers of people taking the pandemic more seriously in the province. Nevertheless, I do still see far too many people not wearing their masks, practising appropriate personal distancing and hand hygiene or taking other necessary measures to prevent the spread of the virus.

“We urge such individuals to change their mindset and behaviours as it could well save lives, perhaps even that of their own loved ones. As a healthcare worker, I can assure them that the dangers posed by this infection are very real. I believe that each of us need to take responsibility for our actions, our own health and that of others,” he says

Mathebula says that while Netcare Pholoso Hospital had seen more Covid-19 positive patients as the virus spread, the specialists at the hospital have noted a decline in the number of people coming for consultations and receiving treatment for other potentially serious chronic medical conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, and HIV.

“These patients have no doubt avoided visiting their doctors as they were concerned about the possibility of contracting Covid-19 at this time. While this is understandable, it is a deeply concerning development, as we have recently seen an increasing number of patients who are Covid-19 negative but whose chronic conditions have complicated to the point that they have become emergencies.”

Khosa agrees, adding that this highlights the importance of patients staying in touch with their doctors, and ensuring that

their chronic conditions are properly managed. An important aspect of this is that they should continue to take their medications as prescribed.

"It should not be forgotten that, while Covid-19 often tends to cause more serious illness in those with chronic conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure, these conditions themselves can also result in complications and have serious implications for persons' health if they are not properly managed."

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