

Top SA public hospital launches pioneering innovation programme

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In a first for Africa, Groote Schuur Hospital is launching an innovation programme to catalyse a new approach to improving public healthcare.

Groote Schuur Hospital (GSH) in Cape Town is taking the lead in healthcare innovation for service delivery in Africa. This week it celebrates the launch of a new initiative dedicated to fostering innovation at the frontlines of the healthcare system.

An internationally acclaimed research institution and training hospital linked to UCT, Groote Schuur is also one of Cape Town's largest public health facilities and experiences a range of organisation and resource challenges which affect the quality of care of its patients.

The Groote Schuur Innovation Programme is the first of its kind to support public sector health workers to become the innovators themselves. The programme will focus on building innovation capacity in the hospital and creating a network of frontline innovation leaders and linking these with policy makers in the Western Cape Department of Health.

"The challenges faced in healthcare in South Africa are all opportunities to transform the system, creating a more people-centred healthcare system for staff and patients alike," says Dr Lindi van Niekerk, one of the organisers of the initiative. The Innovation Initiative at Groote Schuur Hospital is a partnership between GSH, the Western Cape Department of Health, and Inclusive Healthcare Innovation (iHI) - which was co-founded by the University of Cape Town Graduate School of Business (GSB), the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation & Entrepreneurship and the UCT Faculty of Health Science. The Initiative is supported by the GSH Hospital Facilities Board, and the launch was attended by partners to the programme, Mr JJ van Dongen (CEO Philips Africa), Roelf Mulder (XYZ Design) and Etienne Dryer (Pricewaterhouse Coopers).

Dr Bhavna Patel, CEO of Groote Schuur Hospital, says that this is the first time an African healthcare institution is pursuing such an initiative and demonstrates its relevance with regard to addressing social needs in South Africa. "We are proud to be leading the way, to become a beacon for healthcare innovation in Africa," she says.

Van Niekerk says health workers working on the front lines of healthcare delivery often experience a different reality to the one presented on paper in policy documents and presentations. "Weekly, we present patients with life limiting sentences, even to those of a young age, due to a lack of resources available to treat them with. These constant pressures often make us question why we entered this profession and it becomes easy to slip down a spiral of hopelessness."

She adds, "We at the UCT GSB Bertha Centre for Social Innovation & Entrepreneurship, and together with our partners at the UCT Faculty of Health Sciences, believe that now is the time for change. To ensure a better future for our patients and the next generation of health workers, it is our responsibility to contribute to, not merely improving the system through small tweaks, but to radically transform the system."

"The GSH Innovation Programme will tap into the creative and intellectual capital of frontline healthcare workers and provide them with the opportunity to turn their good ideas into reality to solve some of the hospital's biggest challenges," says Van Niekerk. Research by the UCT GSB Bertha Centre, in partnership with the Innovation Unit (London), has identified eight key challenges that are hindering care delivery at GSH from a staff perspective: using waiting times more effectively; patient records and notes; working better with community services; boosting volunteer resources; more efficient entry and exit of patients; tracking and communicating; improving care for specific patient groups. These challenges will be put forward to staff to be solved.

The programme will enable teams of Groote Schuur staff to work on a select number of projects focusing on these priority challenge areas. Staff will be facilitated from conceptual idea development through to a realisable prototype and onwards to a measurable implemented project. Support will be available as seed capital, expert technical support and mentorship will be available for nine months.

In October 2015, these staff innovators will have the opportunity to present their work to the Western Cape Department of Health.

Speaking at the launch, Dr François Bonnici, Director of the Bertha Centre said, "This extraordinary initiative is a collaborative platform for individuals and organisations across a variety of sectors and disciplines with a common goal to improve healthcare delivery in Africa through innovation."

"It is very fitting that we are launching this initiative at Groote Schuur Hospital. One of the oldest hospitals in the country, it also has a proud history of innovation including the world's first heart transplant performed in 1967. We hope that the programme will inspire everyone who works in the system to continually seek to find new and better ways of promoting wellness, preventing and treating illness, and helping people live longer, healthier, happier lives."

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