

The first black Africans to qualify in Dentistry in South Africa

The years 1975 and 1977 mark extraordinary events in the history of Dentistry in South Africa. Amongst the names of those graduating Bachelor of Dental Science at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, are those of Kenneth TQ Mathobela (1975) and Teresa Norma Nxumalo (1977) (not pictured).

They are the first male and female black Africans to have qualified as dentists in South Africa. In itself that is a romantic record... but the excitement continued, for, later, Kenneth and Teresa married! A story-book theme!

Strict enforcement of the Population Registration Act of 1950 had for many years prevented the admission of black South Africans to the study of Dentistry. The registration of Kenneth as a Dental Student at Wits marked an opening of opportunities for black South Africans to enter the Dental Profession. By 1995, Wits had qualified 127 Black South African Dentists.

The Medical University of South Africa, MEDUNSA, was created in 1976 for the specific purpose of training black medical and dental practitioners. Dental Therapy students had been admitted in 1975 for training at the Madikoti Advanced College of Technology, based at Seshego.

The class completed study at Ga Rankuwa Hospital, and graduated in 1977. The first intake of Dental Therapy students at MEDUNSA was the next year, 1978, with the class graduating in 1981. The following year, 1982, marked the first intake of Dental students.

The Universities of Pretoria, of Stellenbosch, of Western Cape and of Natal have all followed suit opening the opportunities for all South Africans to enter the profession.



Between 2002 and 2015, the number of black professionals in Dentistry had increased by 129%, and in the same period the number of black dental specialists had increased by 400%. Impressive percentages, yes, but the actual numbers remained small. The population of South Africa was recorded in 2020 as 59,308,690... and the number of dentists was about 6,500, giving an approximate ratio of 0,92 dentists per 10,000 population. There remains the need to enhance that proportion.

Whilst looking at firsts in South African Dentistry, these colleagues are prominent... first black African Maxillo Facial and Oral Surgeon to qualify in South Africa: Dr Sydney Mogafe; First black African Orthodontist to qualify in South Africa; Dr Solly Nkhumulene; First black African to qualify in South Africa as a Periodontist: Dr Londiwe Shangase; First black African to qualify as a Prosthodontist: Dr Zola Ndimandi; First black African to qualify as a Community Dentist: Dr Tsepo Gugushe.

Achievement is never ordinary... but at least the opportunities are no longer extraordinary.

Sad note: Both Kenneth and Teresa have passed away.

References

1. Bhyat A, Chikte U. The changing demographic profile of dentists and dental specialists in South Africa. *International Journal of Dentistry*. <http://doc.org/10.1111/ij.12332/>.
2. Statistics South Africa. Department of Statistics.
3. Annual Report, 2018.2019. The Health Professions Council of South Africa.
4. The Dental Professionals Association. dpa.org.za/index.php/about-us.

