

UCT Faculty of Health Sciences Centenary

1912 - 2012

June 2012, Vol. 102, No. 6 SAMJ



100 years of UCT's Faculty of Health Sciences

The University of Cape Town's Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS) commemorates 100 years of existence on 6 June after the Medical School was founded with the opening of the Anatomical and Physiological Laboratories of the South African College at the Hiddingh Campus in the city. South Africans at the time had to go abroad for medical education and the strong call to establish a national medical school was countered by concerns that no school equal to the standard required by recognised universities of Great Britain could be established in the Cape Colony, which lacked staff and facilities for adequate clinical instruction (Howard Phillips, personal communication).

The protagonists were not dissuaded. Dr Barnard Fuller, Chair of the South African College Senate and a passionate advocate for a South African medical school, concluded his 1907 presidential address to the local branch of the Medical Association with a dream: 'Looking on into the future' he said, '... I see before me, as in a vision, a great teaching university arising under the shadow of old Table Mountain and part of that university is composed of a well-equipped medical faculty ... that will be a credit to South Africa.'¹ Fuller's dream has been realised as we celebrate a Medical School and an FHS that is credit to South Africa and its people, medical science, innovation, education and healthcare of populations way beyond our borders. The Centenary celebrations provide the FHS with the opportunity to reflect on the past, to celebrate the present, and to plan for building a future, on the strengths of our past. As the oldest medical school in sub-Saharan Africa, its achievements have been legendary. These include educating some of the finest minds in the country; generating research that led to innovations like Zwarenstein's frog test for pregnancy and Cormack's CAT scanner; and producing great medical advances, such as the first successful heart transplant.

From graduating its first 2 physicians in 1922, the Medical School has grown into an FHS with almost 4 000 under- and postgraduate students in 2012. The Faculty focuses on medical, nursing and the rehabilitation professions, and basic, translational, clinical and public health sciences. It is led by our commitment to social justice and driven by our goals to produce health professionals, educators, scientists, and research capable of responding to society's needs.

The past 100 years have witnessed significant changes and achievements. We have substantially increased our admissions of under- and postgraduate students from all parts of our country and continent, and our demographic profile has been transformed significantly. Underpinned by a modernised curriculum, which is delivered in facilities across the health system, we enjoy an excellent throughput of graduates, and at postgraduate level produce scientists and specialists in fields across the spectrum of medical science and healthcare. More than 20 research units and groupings focus on the national burden of disease, and on the health system as a whole. Led by A-rated researchers, National Research Foundation chairs and world-class scientists, our research includes medical and health sciences, from basic, translational and clinical sciences, to epidemiology, public health and socio-legal sciences applied to health. In pursuit of our goals, we enjoy partnerships with communities, health services, colleagues and institutions across the country and the continent, and increasingly find synergies with the experiences of the global south.

We have much to celebrate in the form of academic meetings, social events, published and personal reflections from alumni, students and colleagues, but also reflect on the darker side of our history. Events include reaffirming our commitment to never again perpetuate the injustices of the past, and remembering the many staff and students who opposed the apartheid system and its impact on health (such as Sir Bill Hoffenberg and Professor Francis Ames). The Centenary is a platform from which to grow the Faculty into the next century, and to consider our potential to engage with future scenarios for medicine and healthcare. That future presents many challenges and opportunities.

There is excitement of that brave new world that lies in institutions like the Singularity University, the FutureMed programme of which aims to explore how the impact of rapidly developing technologies such as low-cost genomic sequencing, stem cells, synthetic biology, gene therapy, mobile phone applications and crowd-sourced health data affect the future of healthcare and medical science.²

On the other hand, there is a deep concern that these new technologies will supersede that most privileged interaction between health professional and patient – communication, touch and care – described as 'a transformative, transcending ritual'; and that the sacrifice of the human engagement on the altar of technology will relegate the patient to the status of an 'i-patient'.³

The health of populations continues to be challenged by threats from biological agents, lifestyle, environmental change, socio-political and economic determinants, and national health systems are faced with addressing compromised access to quality care and ever-widening disparities.

Standing on the threshold of a new era, the FHS will have to navigate future terrain in partnership with our national, regional and global health partners. In facing these challenges, we aspire to continue our trajectory of excellence and relevance of the past 100 years. Through generating research, technology and innovation to address the challenges of health and by producing graduates fit for purpose, we will strive to contribute to a future in which the new technologies can take their rightful place next to the delivery of compassionate, quality care in health systems which are informed by evidence, responsive to need, and committed to advancing health for all. This edition, produced by current and former staff and students of the Faculty, is a tribute to the past, and a hope for the future.

Professor Marian Jacobs
Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences
University of Cape Town



1. Louw JH. In the Shadow of Table Mountain. Cape Town: Balkema, 1968.
2. Singularity University. FutureMed Program. <http://futuremed2020.com> (accessed 18 May 2012).
3. Verghese A. 'A doctor's touch'. http://www.ted.com/talks/abraham_verghese_a_doctor_s_touch.html (accessed 17 May 2012).