

A short history of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Walter Sisulu University

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A short history of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Walter Sisulu University (WSU) would be incomplete without delving into how a hospital came to exist at all in the city of Umtata (now Mthatha), named after the Umtata River. It all started with the Anglican bishop Dr Henry Callaway, a medical doctor, who came to the territory known as the Transkei in the early 1870s.^[1,2] His services as a medical doctor were much sought after. This gave birth to the idea of starting a medical mission near the Bishop's Deanery in the grounds of St John's College. Although the first doctor did not stay long, the second one, by the name of Dr W D Johnston, arrived in 1881 and started to plan for a little hospital. A small one-roomed wooden house that was only big enough for a couple of patients was erected in the mission grounds in 1882. This little hospital was later expanded into three small brick rooms in the same compound and formally opened in 1884 by Major Henry Elliot, who was then Chief Magistrate of the Transkei Territories, as Umtata Cottage Hospital.^[2] Gradual expansion of Umtata Cottage Hospital over the subsequent years ultimately led to a hospital with 18 beds in 1892. However, it soon became obvious that the hospital needed to expand further.

Plans were hatched for a bigger, new hospital, but it was not until 1914 that enough money and a new site became available for the new hospital off the mission grounds. When eventually built, it was named Sir Henry Elliot Hospital after Major Elliot, the longstanding Chief Magistrate who had made it possible with a generous donation, which was money collected by Chief Dalindyebo and his subjects as a farewell gift for him when he retired from his duties that spanned over 25 years as Chief Magistrate of the Transkei Territories in 1902.^[2] Major Elliot's desire was to have wards of the hospital for the locals in his remembrance. However, additional money needed to be raised to build the hospital, which was completed in 1916. It initially had 35 beds, 13 for Europeans and 22 for local blacks. This was later expanded to 49 beds and then 70 beds by 1927.^[2]

Although Sir Henry Elliot Hospital was initially built to accommodate both Europeans and black Africans, it later became a hospital for whites only, and a new site for a hospital for the locals had to be found. We assume that this change came about in 1948, when apartheid was introduced, or soon after. A search of the internet does not give any indication when the hospital in Umtata for blacks only was built, but this became Umtata General Hospital (UGH), now Mthatha Regional Hospital. It is also not clear when the first specialist doctors began to work at UGH. It is very likely that this happened after the Transkei became nominally independent in 1976. This would then be the origins of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at WSU. The first specialist obstetrician and gynaecologist to work at UGH was Dr Mayosi. He was later joined by Dr Clegg, an Englishman.

By the time the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Transkei (Unitra), now WSU, was started in 1985 by Prof. Marina Xaba-Mokoena, as the founding Dean, and her brave pioneer professors, Dr Clegg was head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology. He was succeeded by Prof. Daniel Ncayiyana in 1987. By the time the first group of medical students, all nine of them, reached their fourth year in 1988, Prof. Ncayiyana had managed to recruit additional members of staff, namely Dr Jeyarajah, a Sri Lankan national, Dr Kojo Essel, a Ghanaian national, and Dr James Byaruhanga, a Ugandan national.

Dr Geoffrey A B Buga, a Ugandan national, joined the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the end of 1990, when the pioneer class of medical students were just about to sit their final examinations. By then, Prof. Ncayiyana had become Dean of the medical school, and Dr Jeyarajah was the acting head of department. The Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology moved into its brand-new spacious premises, complete with three theatres, a maternity ward, antenatal and postnatal wards and a gynaecology ward, as well as a neonatal ward, in 1991. As many of the UGH buildings were very old, plans for a new academic hospital were hatched in the late 1990s. The hospital was completed in 2002, and the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology moved to the new, yet cramped, Nelson Mandela Academic Hospital in 2004. Meanwhile, changes occurring in the higher education sector led to Unitra merging with the Border Technikon and Eastern Cape Technikon to form WSU in July 2005.

Dr Buga was appointed associate professor and head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology by Unitra in November 1992. He is credited with building the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, with the able assistance of Prof. Mana L Mdaka, who joined in November 2003, into the formidable department it is today. Prof. Buga was appointed a full professor in January 2004 and continued as head of department until April 2015, when he handed over the mantle to Prof. Mdaka. Prof. Mdaka only handed over the department to Dr Xolani Mbongozi as acting head in 2024.

Prof. Buga realised early on after assuming the position of head of department that the only way to increase staff numbers in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology was to 'grow our own timber'. However, it was not until 1999 that a successful application for registrar training was made to the National Council for Higher Education and the Health Professions Council of South Africa by the Faculty of Health Sciences. Meanwhile, during this time the problem-based undergraduate training programme was fine-tuned,^[3] and since then the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology has continued to receive accolades from graduating students as one of the best clinical disciplines. Its popularity has inspired many of our graduates to specialise in obstetrics and gynaecology, and they are playing their trade all over the country.

Although the beginning of registrar training was slow, as there were few candidates to recruit from, registrar positions have now become highly competitive. We have indeed grown our own timber and can now claim to be the best-staffed department in the medical school, with 14 specialists, the majority of whom trained both as undergraduates and as registrars at WSU. The future of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at WSU can only be brighter, as the foundations are very strong.

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