



Celebrating a quarter-century of the UP School of Health Systems and Public Health (SHSPH)

This special issue of the South African Medical Journal celebrates the 25th Anniversary of the University of Pretoria's School of Health Systems and Public Health (SHSPH). The school was founded with a vision that transcended boundaries, embraced diversity, and aimed for excellence in public health education, research and service in Africa and South Africa. The legacy of the past twenty-five years, shaped by the collective efforts of our academic staff and passionate students is not just in buildings and statistics, but in the lives touched and in the shaping of the minds and hearts of those who will transform our healthcare landscape over the coming 25 years and beyond.

Over the past quarter-century, the school has grown from a modest institution into a leading center for public health excellence with strong international strategic partners. These partnerships gave birth to our flagship Monitoring and Evaluation in general health and HIV/AIDS programmes. Similarly, our partnership with Harvard School of Public Health led to the creation of the Albertina Sisulu Executive Leadership Programme in Health (ASELPH) about ten years ago. The ASELPH programme has now trained over 250 health facility managers and CEOs, who are making a difference in their various places of work across the country. We continue to strengthen the public health workforce with our fully online postgraduate diploma in public health, which has over 1 200 active students, including some from different countries in Africa. Both our Africa Centre for Tobacco Industry Monitoring & Policy Research (ATIM) and the Institute for Sustainable Malaria Control (ISMC) continue to provide capacity-building in leadership in respective disciplines in several countries in Africa.

Our commitment to equity and justice in healthcare guided all our endeavours. We have championed initiatives addressing the unique health challenges facing our local communities. For example, through our field epidemiology training programme in partnership with the National Institute of Communicable Diseases, we have been able to investigate scores of outbreaks in local communities. Our rural satellite research site in Vhembe provides a platform to partner with local communities in malaria control and study the long-term impact of insecticide exposure on child development. Our registrars in Public Health Medicine continue to provide much-needed healthcare services and management support in hospitals within the province, at the National Department of Health (NDoH), and National Institute for Occupational Health, to name a few.

Our students, the lifeblood of our school, have gone on to become leaders, advocates and change-makers. It is therefore no coincidence that all of the first authors of this special issue were our Masters or PhD students who have now published their first papers, making contributions to various fields of public health. This issue features papers that highlight challenges within the health system from pregnancy through adolescence to adulthood. This also includes challenges related to prescribed minimum benefits (PMB), which remain relevant as the country rolls out the National Health Insurance towards achieving universal health coverage in South Africa. Other papers featured in this special issue address global health challenges with relevance beyond the boundaries of South Africa. These include studies that could inform policy and interventions on raising awareness about preventable blindness and prostate cancer awareness among men, promoting HIV testing and preventing new forms of tobacco use, especially among young girls and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups. Finally, this issue also touches on the use of digital technology in promoting health professions education and the use of machine learning models to plan HIV services.

Looking forward, the challenges we face in public health are evolving and complex, and so are the tools available to us, including artificial intelligence and big data, to address global health challenges such as climate change and health, and prevention and preparedness for future pandemics. We commit to continue to push boundaries to achieve broader sustainable development goals through our focus on transdisciplinary research. However, all that we do, whether at our school or elsewhere around the region and the globe, will be for one purpose, a purpose best summarised in our school's vision statement: 'Enriching lives through Public Health Excellence in Africa!'

Acknowledgement

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