

*Restoring hope to demoralised Limpopo Province healthcare workers by showing them the fruits of Respectful Maternal Care (RMC), has become an all-consuming passion for social scientist, Dr Joy Summerton.*

# Creating

*respectful maternity care advocates*

## DR JOY SUMMERTON

### *Rural Institutional Award*

*To support the implementation of a programme aimed at mentoring maternal unit operational managers and maternity care champions to improve intrapartum care at district and regional hospitals in Limpopo.*

Limpopo's neonatal mortality rates are among the worst in the country. However, a series of strategically targeted Discovery Foundation funding initiatives, today aimed at mentoring maternity unit managers and healthcare workers, has contributed to a neonatal mortality plunge of 13% between 2013 and 2017.

It was so poor in 2016 that still-births and neonatal mortalities were everyday occurrences. At that stage, a staggering 26% of neonatal deaths were attributable to birth asphyxia and the in-facility maternal mortality rate was hovering at 130 out of every 100 000. "We were losing babies of 2.5kg and above for no logical reason and women in labour weren't being properly monitored," says Joy, Project Manager for the Limpopo Initiative for Newborn Care (LINC) and Limpopo Maternal CARE (LimMCARE), programmes in the province.

Their biggest challenge is reducing a neonatal mortality rate that has stayed at about 11 deaths per 1 000 births, with low birth-weights an ongoing problem. One of the interventions is introducing Continuous Positive Airway Pressure, (CPAP). "However, only 40% of Limpopo's rural hospitals have medical air," Joy reveals. This intervention also requires high level nurse training. Luckily, LINC received a generous donation of low-cost,

low-maintenance bubble CPAP (bCPAP) machines that do not need medical air. These were distributed to hospitals throughout Limpopo, with a specific focus on the Mopani District. The distribution of the bCPAP machines was accompanied by onsite support and mentoring, as well as basic trouble shooting if they encountered problems.

By using World Health Organization recommendations for maternal care and the Maternity Care Guidelines for South Africa as best practice, Joy and her team are slowly working wonders. The Discovery Foundation Rural Institutional Award to LINC will be implemented over three years. "We have seen it is best to start really small and focus our support and mentoring. You have to make sure that facilities you are supporting are at least crawling, or even better walking on their own, before you refocus support on new facilities."

The first phase will be to support the Greater-Letaba sub-district in Mopani District, which has one district hospital and 21 feeder clinics. Joy says the plan is to document lessons as they roll out the project, ensuring sustained behaviour change among all staff working in all maternity units. "Once we have proof of concept, we can roll it out over the entire province," she adds.

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### The formidable champions of Respectful Maternal Care

"For Respectful Maternal Care (RMC) to be sustainable, we need champions. Doctors or nurses who are passionate about pregnant women and newborns. By equipping them with skills and knowledge to train other front-line healthcare providers, we get the knock-on effect," she says. Since LimMCARE was introduced in 2017, Joy has found two pivotal champions who are central to their successes. "The first was Jason Marcus, an advanced midwifery lecturer from the University of Cape Town, where RMC first began in this country," she says. Together with LimMCARE clinical mentor, Sister Mapei Moshabela, a former Limpopo Province maternal manager who now describes herself as "re-tyred," they're a formidable team.

Joy outlines one problem that contributes to deaths. "The primary healthcare clinics in Greater-Letaba sub-district stopped delivering babies – they close their gates at 17:00 and refer women to Kgapane District Hospital." Official policy is that clinics should deliver babies of low-risk mothers, referring them to a district hospital only when there are complications.

"If clinics do not follow the policy, those moms and babies stack up at the district hospital, occupying beds that should be for those that need it. This overwhelms healthcare providers at the hospital and inevitably compromises the quality of care. So, we need to deliver, observe and discharge at the clinics – which must be open 24 hours a day," she emphasises.



### Transforming attitudes is inspiring

The most uplifting part of her job is watching healthcare providers transform. "At the start they're demoralised, angry even. They don't want to try anything new. Just getting them to allow family or friends into the labour ward was the biggest hurdle. After a while you see the smiles and then they're even having conversations with patients," she enthuses.

LINC has introduced Respectful Maternal Care award ceremonies with trophies for starting the programme, and a floating trophy for the best facility. "We did the first 24-hour shift with one clinic on 21 April 2019, just to show it can be done."

The granddaughter of an Englishman who settled down to farm in Hogsback with his brother, both marrying Xhosa women from the nearby village, Joy has "out-of-the box" thinking in her DNA. Raised in a family of Western medicine healthcare workers, she did her PhD on the role of traditional health practitioners in the treatment and care of people living with HIV and AIDS, "which turned my entire world view and belief system on its head," she laughs.

"I found that you need to work with traditional health practitioners because no matter how many times you scream at your patients, they share a world view with a large majority."

She became frustrated with pure research because, "you end up opening a can of worms and hoping someone else will solve the problem. I wanted to be part of the solution. Identifying the problem and working collectively to intervene successfully. Ask them what change they want and then say, let's do it together."

Then we can look back and see how far we've come, asking; what's next? That's what gets me up in the morning," she says.

A single mother of three children, Phiwokuhle, Sphamandla and Sinethemba, all conceived through artificial insemination, Joy lives outside Polokwane with several dogs and a large garden, all of which she revels in.

### Better maternal care boosting trust

One thing Joy is aiming for is to persuade mothers to attend Ante-Natal-Clinics as soon as they fall pregnant, increasing the chances of regular attendance. LimMCARE has also taken the bold step of introducing a minimum of 12 antenatal care visits for pregnant women in Mopani district, as opposed to the standard eight visits. This is already making a huge difference in the management of pregnant women, especially picking up complications timeously. "If you treat women well and with respect, word travels.

We're trying to get the pull factor so any complications can be picked up early. Education is vital to help mothers make informed decisions, from conception to birth, otherwise you've failed them," she says.

Another pillar of RMC is teaching mothers to identify birth companions. "It needs to be somebody you trust who helps you remember stuff. It's been amazing, they're choosing the birth companions on their own now after we tell them about all the benefits."