

Should a paediatric-oncologist post be available in Kwa-Zulu Natal when she completes her training, paediatrician Kershinee Reddy will grab it with both hands.

The Western Cape where Dr Kerishnee Reddy started her training at Tygerberg Hospital in 2019, is currently the only province with accreditation for paediatric oncology training. Before this, while working as a paediatrician at Edendale Hospital, she and her colleagues referred cancer patients to Grey's Tertiary Hospital in Pietermaritzburg. This hospital established a haematology oncology unit in 2013, staffed by one paediatric oncologist and one paediatric haematologist. Both these specialists have since left Grey's Hospital. Dr Reddy says, "The paediatric haematologist from Albert Luthuli comes to the Grey's Hospital unit twice a week. This unit now only has children receiving chemotherapy and some who have completed treatment and need follow-up. The majority of our new patients at Edendale Hospital are referred to Durban."

Growing adept at adapting

Growing up in Chatsworth, Durban, Kershinee always wanted to do medicine. Her straight-A performance in matric was, however, not enough for university acceptance. She stared out studying pharmacy and after graduating, she was accepted to Wits Medical School. Realising her dream of becoming a doctor in 2008, Kershinee says, "Pharmacy wasn't fulfilling in terms of patient care, so when the opportunity came to do medicine, I went for it. I really enjoy the patient interaction and helping people."

Her interest in paediatrics began while doing her Community Service year at Piet Retief Hospital in Mpumalanga, after which she joined the registrar programme at Grey's and Edendale Hospitals in Pietermaritzburg and Albert Luthuli Hospital in Durban.

The oncology workload is very high in Kwa-Zulu Natal. Sometimes they're overrun at Albert Luthuli Hospital.

DR KERSHINEE REDDY

*Subspecialist Award
Stellenbosch University
Paediatric oncology*

Training
to fill a dire need

Handling the emotional impact

The downside of paediatrics, for her, is seeing sexual abuse cases and having to take the sexual assault history and carry out the examination. "It is one of the worst things I've ever done. It is demotivating that people could be so cruel to children."

Sometimes you do everything you can for a child and they still do not make it. "Then you have to tell the family that their child has brain stem death and is going to die; or tell a 13-year-old with bone cancer that we found it was spreading everywhere." It is after experiences like these that she calls her sister, Deshinee, a nursing manager of the cardiac catheterisation and pain management laboratories at a New Orleans hospital.

"She understands and, together with my parents, always has encouraging words of support. Of course, my friends and colleagues in the same field are another great resource. We understand one another, but we still have to assess and remember why we're doing it."

Her parents taught a strong worth-ethic, with her mother a primary school teacher and her father a corporate paint buyer. "They instilled in us the importance of education and made sure we were educated and could stand on our own two feet. I put my continuing studying directly down to them," she adds. Thousands of patients in Kwa-Zulu Natal who are struggling with oncology diagnoses, access to treatment, challenging therapy and survivorship, will certainly be thankful to the Reddy family in years to come.

Helping Kwa-Zulu Natal's children

Kershinee worked as a general paediatrician for two and a half years at Edendale Hospital near Pietermaritzburg, at the height of the oncology services crisis. She noticed many children admitted to Edendale Hospital's general paediatric ward with signs and symptoms suggesting cancer, with initial investigations pointing towards such a diagnosis. "I want to complete this training for myself, but also for the children. These kids are already subjected to the trauma of a cancer diagnosis and then they have to travel far for treatment, either to Pietermaritzburg or Durban."

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