
Imagine how much better patient care would be, if we instilled in overworked healthcare staff a constant awareness of their common humanity, mutual respect and patience, with active on-site leadership?

Add to that collaborative team work, listening to one another in a more flattened hierarchy and mutually acknowledged best care practice, and you very quickly have a more functional, efficient healthcare system. That's the working theory, but Professor Louis Jenkins, Head of Family and Emergency Medicine at the Stellenbosch University-linked George Hospital wants to help turn it into a sustainable leadership development model. Pragmatic, ethical and values-driven team practices will lie at the core of the envisaged leadership training.

This George Hospital-based veteran physician has targeted two health districts in the Western Cape for a two-year values-driven 'Leadership in Action,' outreach workshop programme.

Solid corporate and academic backing

Besides the Discovery Foundation, he has some formidable backing through the Department of Family and Emergency Medicine at University of Stellenbosch, the Academy of Business in Society, the Nottingham Business School, the IBM Corporation, and Glasko-Smith-Klein Pharmaceuticals. With Professor Arnold Smit, Head of USB Social Impact at University of Stellenbosch School of Business and Dr Zilla North, his George Hospital medical manager, the team will host cross-disciplinary, weekend workshops in the Garden Route and Central Karoo Districts. If they achieve the desired impact, the model will be rolled out to other districts, even provinces.

George Regional Hospital serves 10 district hospitals and Professor Jenkins, with his substantial rural health experience, is intimately familiar with the human resource, equipment and administrative challenges of rural primary healthcare.

"We know from experience that stable, robust rural healthcare teams are built on a long-serving, dedicated and committed leadership core. We want to impart the skills and values-driven practices that help make sustainable leadership possible," he says.

Changing
our ways of being –
The 'Leadership in
Action' initiative

PROFESSOR LOUIS JENKINS

Rural Institutional Award
University of Stellenbosch

To assist George Hospital to implement a sustainable leadership development model, based on the Values-driven Leadership in Action programme initiated by the Academy of Business in Society (ABIS), for healthcare services in rural districts.



Systems implode without the right leadership

He cites an example of the Beaufort West District Hospital losing its medical manager. "Suddenly the junior doctor team was without leadership. It impacted hugely on their social worker, nurses and allied health professionals. Eventually, a medical officer became the clinical manager and then the medical manager, and has now been there for five years. Today, it's one of the most robust hospitals in our area," he says.

Asked to outline an ethical dilemma, Professor Jenkins cites a medical doctor, working in eye clinics where 60 to 70 patients are booked daily, who often works until 20:00 on clinic days. "The ethics of balancing good patient care with wholesome self-care will be explored in these workshops. Understanding what values drive us, and developing better self-management, are just some ways to keep colleagues healthy and retain them in the rural areas," he adds.

Assumptions are destructive

Often there are assumed values around respect and trust, which illustrate a power gradient. "For example, when a community service doctor at a district facility calls a more senior regional hospital doctor who snappily asks why they cannot do the procedure themselves. It's very easy for regional staff to be presumptuous, not realising what their district or primary healthcare clinic colleagues are up against," he adds.

Building trust involves taking time to ask after one another. "We want to recognise the common humanity among staff and our patients," he says.

"If somebody refuses to do something, going the disciplinary route can be destructive. Instead, ask them what's going on. They might be having financial problems or be a single, divorced mother. Asking in an unguarded moment can build, heal and restore meaning for this person at work. If somebody's lost their joy and bordering on burnout, that helps. It's about awareness, listening unconditionally and caring. That's what brings us together," he stresses.

Asked how one builds resilience to avoid burn-out, Professor Jenkins says experience has taught him that it's not just

about hard outputs such as the number of patients you attend to, operations, outreaches or cost-efficiencies.

A Western Cape survey conducted three years ago on behaviour change, organisational behaviour and performance in the provincial healthcare system, highlighted some concerns. "Staff reported that they experienced the workplace hierarchial and that they weren't appreciated or being heard. Since then, there's been an active process of culture change to improve things at all levels – and our work is aligned with this," he says. As part of his work, a graphic designer will develop a high-quality practical workbook to bolster the training and to help develop more trainers for the rollout of the values-driven 'Leadership in Action' programme.

Professor Jenkins observes that South Africa has gone through a period of "very questionable" ethics in many sectors recently. "But there's been a turn and we recognise that to practice ethical medicine, ethical leadership is critical. We want to be part of new hope in South Africa," he adds. Married to a former primary school teacher, Professor Jenkins runs three times a week and loves gardening and planting trees on his smallholding near Wilderness.

Ethical leadership development

The programme will focus on ethical dilemmas with systemic consequences. The goal is to build relationships and enable communication and collaboration to resolve health-system issues. Professor Jenkins says there will be five annual workshops consisting of three multi-disciplinary ones, one train-the-trainer and one trainer-accreditation workshop. "We'll ask all facilities to nominate people. We're keeping the workshop down to about 15 people to ensure it is interactive and allows people to discuss real ethical dilemmas."