

UP's Faculty of Veterinary Science, SA's only one, celebrates 100 years

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The University of Pretoria's Faculty of Veterinary Science is celebrating its centenary this year. Dean Professor Vinny Naidoo tells Primarashni Gower how Africa's top vet school was established.

PG: Who founded the Faculty and was it always located in Onderstepoort?

VN: The Faculty was founded by our first Dean Professor Sir Arnold Theiler, a Swiss veterinarian who came to South Africa when the then Transvaal government was looking for a new government veterinarian. He was able to start a laboratory in Daspoort. Since the facility became too small to support activities, he was given funds to purchase de Farm Onderstepoort. In 1908 the first building was erected, giving rise to the Onderstepoort Bacteriology Laboratory (which became the Onderstepoort Veterinary Institute and currently the Agricultural Research Council Onderstepoort Veterinary Research). After negotiation with the government of the time, he was given permission to train veterinarians in 1918 in a joint venture with the Transvaal University College (TUC), which became the University of Pretoria. His argument for said local training was that foreign graduates did not understand the diseases of the country well enough to assist the local agricultural industry. The first veterinary student was admitted in 1920 into the laboratory and the TUC. He was appointed as Dean of the new Faculty of Veterinary Science of TUC and Director of the Bacteriology Laboratory in the same year. Prof Theiler admitted eight students. The Bachelor of Veterinary Science degree became the second "medical degree" offered in the country, with the MBCHB offered at UCT predating it by two years.

The Onderstepoort Veterinary Institute co-trained veterinarians with UP until 1973. From then training was continued by UP on the Onderstepoort Campus with new buildings being added over the years. The New National Faculty of Veterinary Science arose out of the merger of the old UP Faculty of Veterinary Science and that of MEDUNSA in 1999.

PG: What was the Faculty's initial strategy?

VN: The Faculty has always had the strategy of training veterinarians suited to practice under local conditions. Farming in early South Africa was near impossible due the high load of disease like sleeping sickness (nagana), horse sickness, theileriosis, babesiosis and numerous poisonous plants. Prof Theiler was a researcher to his core and wanted to solve problems, with the result that he and his team not only described new diseases but found innovative treatments for them. In addition to having a veterinarian who understood local

disease, he wanted the locally trained veterinarian to have a solid basis in veterinary research.

PG: How has the Faculty grown?

VN: The Faculty started off training eight veterinary students with no facilities of its own to the current facility which has a numerous laboratories and the academic hospital. Over time the Faculty also introduced specialist training in 22 fields of veterinary medicine, the Master of Science and the PhD research degree and a nursing diploma. Most recently the Faculty transitioned into a new nursing degree and a postgraduate diploma. We now have nearly 1 500 undergraduate and postgraduate students, 101 academic staff members.



Dean of UP's Faculty of Veterinary Sciences Professor Vinny Naidoo.

PG: How many graduates does it produce a year (vets and vet nurses)?

VN: Around 172 veterinarians. We are slowly progressing to 190. Nurses around 43, although we're aiming for 50. The Faculty also has one of the most comprehensive veterinary hospitals on the continent that can manage any species under hospitalised condition from a pet hamster to a rhino.

PG: What are the Faculty's major achievements?

VN: The Faculty has trained over 90% of the veterinarians in the country. This has had a major impact on the wellbeing of animals in the country from the way we manage pets to how we support the farming industry. Through efforts of the early staff, the Faculty was also able to introduce specialist veterinary services in the country such as internal medicine, surgery, epidemiology and public health. As a result, there are now numerous specialist veterinary centres in the country. The Faculty has also been a pioneer in the chemical immobilisation of wildlife that now supports an extensive wildlife industry of the country.

PG: How many alumni are there?

VN: From the UP-affiliated degree: 5 020 veterinarians and 1 170 nurses. MEDUNSA trained 120 veterinarians. We have alumni who are heads of local pharmaceutical companies. Some of our alumni have gone on to become deans and heads of schools internationally.

PG: How does the Faculty rank globally?

VN: Top 50 for both veterinary rankings in the QS World University Rankings and Shanghai Rankings (Academic Ranking of World Universities).

PG: What does it specialise in?

VN: Being the only veterinary faculty in the country we focus on all species as it is important to ensure that our graduates meet the needs of the country. Our real strength is in infectious diseases, small animal clinical medicine, epidemiology of local diseases and wildlife chemical immobilisation.

PG: What are the future plans for the Faculty?

We would like to:

- develop the academic hospital into a tertiary care facility that is focused on cutting-edge veterinary medicines;
- become innovators in the inclusion of new technologies into the practice of veterinary medicine;
- be leaders in infectious disease management;
- continue the tradition of innovative research that Arnold Theiler started when the Faculty came into being in 1920; and
- be ranked in the top 30 veterinary schools in the world.

- Author Primarashni Gower

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