

Vet students train to be more than just doctors for animals

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For pet owners in suburbia, the implications of sick animals on their community are seldom a consideration because they can just take their pets to the local veterinarian. Disadvantaged communities are however not always in such a fortunate position. Their remote location and lack of finances or access to veterinary services are often inhibiting factors for proper veterinary care. Yet, animal health and care are essential components of the general health of a society. The Faculty of Veterinary Science at the University of Pretoria (UP) is committed to serving such disadvantaged communities and has focussed its attention on the Pretoria North area through its Veterinary Public Health programme, led by Dr Nenene Qekwana of the Veterinary Public Health Section of the Department of Paraclinical Sciences.

The Veterinary Public Health Section focusses mainly on the promotion of animal, human and environmental health using a One Health approach. An unhealthy animal, human or environment can have dire effects on a society and its economy by spreading food-borne, zoonotic and high-impact infectious disease. The Section understands the importance of protecting the health of animals in disadvantaged communities, even when monetary reimbursement is not possible.

As part of the final year curriculum, veterinary science students spend time serving impoverished communities through primary animal health care services. Students supply primary veterinary care, including deworming, vaccinations and sterilisations. During these periods of service, students not only gain great practical experience, they also learn valuable life lessons about the different cultures and belief systems that make up South Africa. Dr Qekwana says that listening to clients is key to achieving successful results. A population as diverse as South Africa depends on consideration in order to achieve a progressive and unified nation. Beyond having an opportunity to apply the practical skills and knowledge they have acquired over the previous six years, students become contributors to struggling societies and reflect on their roles within the communities they serve. Qualities such as respect and appreciation are learned in these communities. Dr Qekwana highlights a valuable aspect of the programme in that it

exposes students to situations that they would likely not experience otherwise: 'I am trying to expose students to the different situations that make up reality, because these differences are vast.' Furthermore, Dr Qekwana notes that, in order to derive research data from community projects such as these, one has to respect the communities and work with them to achieve academic goals. He therefore encourages students to spend time understanding the structures within these societies.

Reflecting on research possibilities for One Health in these areas, Dr Qekwana highlights the prime position of UP, as the only university in the country that has both a Faculty of Veterinary Science and a Faculty of Health Sciences. There is great potential for collaboration and multi-disciplinary research in both animal and human medicine. Such relationships will also greatly benefit the many disadvantaged communities in South Africa. The great effort that Dr Qekwana has invested in gaining the trust of these communities improves the likelihood that they will be receptive to research projects. He says that the focus of this type of research should always be on improving the conditions of rural areas and disadvantaged communities.

In 2013, Dr Qekwana received international recognition from the World Veterinary Association and the World Animal Health Organisation (OIE) for a project he instituted in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture's Gauteng Veterinary Services. It involves a vaccination campaign and aims to uplift small-scale farmers in the area of Rust de Winter, north of Pretoria. The project's main focus is on disease control in the area. It complements the Faculty's Veterinary Public Health programme as it also serves as an opportunity for students to gain practical experience and learn more about the needs of less fortunate communities. During each visit to the area, the project's team vaccinates over 5 000 cattle and over 1 000 goats, as well as sheep, dogs and cats, against zoonotic diseases and other detrimental infections. Apart from students' experiences, another rewarding part of the project for Qekwana is seeing how farmers improve their skills and development, especially women farmers. Some of these farmers even win awards for their progress and work. The project, which has been running for six years, received an OIE award in 2013. UP was and the first university in Africa to receive this award.

- Author Louise de Bruin