



**22 September 2020**

## **UCT medical students keep elderly citizens company during lockdown**

A group of medical students from the University of Cape Town (UCT) are keeping elderly citizens company during the national lockdown – from a safe distance. The initiative is known as Adopt a Granny/Grandpa and is the work of the student-led UCT Surgical Society (SurgSoc), in partnership with social housing provider Communicare.

During the earlier stages of the lockdown, Communicare approached SurgSoc after the students had run a successful vaccination education campaign with elderly residents. The students jumped at the opportunity, this time by providing elderly residents with companionship during the lockdown.

“This initiative is a unique opportunity to give back and assist our fellow community members [during the] lockdown,” said Alana Williams, SurgSoc’s head of social events and outreach, and a fifth-year medical student.

“The elderly are so often forgotten in many projects and aspects of society, and this initiative was an excellent opportunity to honour them. They have a wealth of knowledge and experience to share.”

When the ongoing initiative was launched in July, Communicare paired volunteers and residents based on common interests and values. Volunteers were also provided with a list of guiding questions, tips and techniques to assist them with making weekly phone calls to their paired granny or grandpa.

Williams added that if volunteers are worried about the health and well-being of their paired grandparent, Communicare is available for additional assistance.

Chanelle Pretorius, another student volunteer, said that the greatest lesson she has learnt from her adopted grandpa is the value of family.

“Nothing cheered him up more than speaking about his children and grandchildren. I could almost hear him beaming with pride,” she said.

Pretorius, who is a fourth-year medical student, wanted to volunteer in the hopes that she could help ease the suffering of elderly people during lockdown. She said that the loneliness many older people face has been exacerbated by the pandemic, and those who do have caring families have been cut off from their support systems. And while Pretorius hoped that the initiative would provide her with an opportunity to uplift her adopted grandparent, she found herself receiving “heaps of joy and upliftment” in return.

The students hope that the initiative will continue even after lockdown restrictions have been lifted.

Williams said that SurgSoc wants to increase the number of student volunteers and would like to branch out into other projects that enhance the health and well-being of elderly people.

SurgSoc was established in 2006 and is affiliated with the Department of Surgery at Groote Schuur Hospital. It’s a group of over 600 medical students who have a passion for surgery, research and outreach. Before the pandemic, their activities included arranging talks, workshops, research projects and outreach initiatives.



The SurgSoc poster calling for volunteers. Photo: Supplied

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**ENDS**

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