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12 May 2021

UCT celebrates the extraordinary role that nurses play in society

"Nursing is not just a profession, it's a skill and an attitude. It's about developing a close relationship with your patients. It's the ability to make a difference in the world – one patient at a time. The compassion and passion that nurses bring to the profession are two of the most highly regarded and valued aspects of their role – not just in South Africa, but also in the world."

Dr Nicki Fouché, the head of the Division of Nursing and Midwifery at the University of Cape Town (UCT), shared these sentiments today on International Nurses' Day. The celebration seeks to honour all nurses and highlight the contribution they make to society.

Fouché said nurses play a significant role in society. "Nurses provide holistic, patient-centred care, and we believe in treating our patients with dignity and respect. We empower patients by ensuring that they are equipped with the correct knowledge to manage their illnesses and teach them techniques on how best to cope during acute illnesses and in rehabilitation. Making a positive difference in our patients' lives and in the lives of their families is what we strive for at all times."

At the division, Fouché shared that they prepare nurses and midwives as clinical nurse specialists through research-informed postgraduate clinical programmes. "We make use of multidisciplinary and collaborative approaches to teaching and learning, and to research. We aim to provide quality nursing and midwifery practice, using research and education. This, we believe, will help us to reach optimum patient and family-centred care within a primary healthcare setting. It's with integrity and respect for our patients and each other, and our commitment to our work, that we can do the work that we do every day," she said.

When asked how the field of nursing has evolved over the years, Fouché said: "Arguably, nursing education has to be the most significant change in the field over the past 10 years. More universities have started to offer specialised degrees, and training has become formal and more complex. But at the same time, learning has become a lot more inclusive, which is wonderful.

With technology advancements and other changes in the industry, universities are always adapting to meet industry needs. And as nursing education evolves, today, programmes place emphasis on innovation, strategy and management to build transformative healthcare leaders. Ultimately, this is what we need."

Many refer to nursing as a thankless job. To change that and give nurses the recognition they deserve, Fouché said education on the role of nurses will help.

“Many people don’t realise what the job entails, and the physical and emotional effect it has on all of us. We experience many daily challenges, and in the past year, during the COVID-19 pandemic, all of it has been amplified. But despite everything – including the thanklessness – we do what we do because we love what we do,” she said.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the extraordinary role that nurses play. Fouché said the pandemic has taught them the importance of self-care and listening to the body, irrespective of the craziness associated with their work during the pandemic. “We’re of no use to anyone if we’re burned out. It has also taught us that life is short, and appreciating each other is essential to just get us through the day – losing so many colleagues has been hard.”

She said the perception that nursing is a women-only profession has to change. “Yes, we have made giant strides to ensure that it becomes a more gender-neutral profession, but the percentage of male nurses in the field remains low. We need more men to take up nursing.”

Associate Professor Lionel Green-Thompson, Dean of UCT’s Faculty of Health Sciences commented: “Nurses have faced the brunt of this pandemic and in many countries, they are the biggest health worker group infected with COVID-19 and have endured extraordinary levels of mental health distress. Today we salute these exceptional human beings who have been unwavering in their plight to provide critical care and healing, who have recommitted themselves to a difficult and dangerous profession every single day during this pandemic, who have chosen to serve.”

In South Africa, more than 400 000 nurses have played a critical role in keeping the health system functioning and providing dignified care under extreme circumstances during the pandemic.

“As our country embarks on one of the biggest vaccination programmes in our history, our nurses will once again form the backbone of this crucial strategy. To all of them, we say a heartfelt: Thank you! Dankie! Enkosi!”, added Green-Thompson.

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