

# Medical school appeals for bodies as cadaver shortage hits training



Professor Hoosen Vawda lectures to medical students at the Dissection Hall at the Nelson R Mandela Medical School in Durban.  
PICTURE: RAJESH JANTILAL

GREG DARDAGAN

THE TRAINING of health-care professionals in KwaZulu-Natal is being hampered by a critical shortage of cadavers.

People were reluctant to donate their bodies, mainly because of religious constraints, respect for tradition and spiritual reasons, said Professor Hoosen Vawda, convener of the body donor programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine in Durban.

Because of this, academics from the discipline of clinical anatomy at the medical school have begun a campaign to encourage the public to donate their bodies after death.

"The campaign aims to create awareness in the community that medical students - the future doctors responsible for life-and-death decisions, as well as the health of the gen-

eral public - need to acquire a hands-on experience on human bodies as an essential prelude to their clinical training," said Vawda.

South African legislation made provision for two different categories of donations and usage of human bodies:

- Total body donation to registered institutes, mainly anatomy departments.

- Body parts and body fluids, including blood, to accredited hospitals and clinics.

The legislation further stipulated that no such categories of human body composites could be sold or donated for financial gain by the donor, or living relatives. The entire process was subject to an ethical procedure and controlled by the inspector of anatomy, who functioned under the jurisdiction of the Department of Health.

Vawda said the medical school used cadavers for the

training of medical and nursing students, as well as several other registered groups of health professionals.

"Cadavers are also used for research purposes by medical doctors specialising in a specific discipline of medicine such as orthopaedic surgery, psychiatry, ophthalmology, oncology and otorhinolaryngology.

"In addition, bodies are used by specialists in medical training workshops dealing with prosthetic body parts and minimally invasive surgical procedures such as 'keyhole surgery'."

In addition to the above medical training purposes, which formed the major category of usage, body donor forms issued to each potential donor required informed consent for the bodies to be used, as well, for pure scientific research.

"Prior to a specific re-

search project being conducted on the cadavers, a research-specific protocol must be submitted to the UKZN research and ethics committee for approval of the proposed research project by the candidate.

"The public is assured that no research can be conducted without this approval," said Vawda.

Dedication and burial ceremonies, officiated at by priests, were held regularly to emphasise the respect the Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine had for the human body in death, and the patient in life.

## Respect in death

"These ceremonies bring about the realisation that the medical fraternity cannot cure disease in a patient, ultimately leading to the demise of the patient, who has then donated his or her body for medical research and training. This is the body that needs to be respected and treated in an ethical manner, not only in life, but also in death.

"The public is reluctant to consider donating their bodies because of religious and cultural constraints. Hence, education in consultation and partnership with religious leaders about considering body donation is needed at a

young age, probably in high school... This will allay the natural fear that humans have about death and dying, as well as the thought and justifiably repulsive experience of having one's body being dissected," Vawda said.

At the conclusion of the process, the majority of cadavers were cremated or, depending on the wishes of the donors, buried in individual coffins. Since 2000, an average of 20 bodies a year had been donated to the discipline of clinical anatomy at the medical school.

These numbers were inadequate to serve the training needs of the increased student numbers in recent years.

"There is a critical shortage of bodies, hence the appeal to the general public to consider donating their bodies.

"Your donation will save a life in the future. At present, the number of body donations is inadequate for the educational and research needs of the faculty," added Vawda.

- For further queries about the body donation process, e-mail Professor Vawda at [vawda@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:vawda@ukzn.ac.za).

To receive a human body donor information pack, potential donors are requested to phone the chief technician in the discipline of clinical anatomy at UKZN at 031 260 4400.