



## TB TREATMENT GUIDELINES BEGIN TO IMPACT



Education outreach training at Batho Clinic.

A groundbreaking on-site training programme equipping nurses to diagnose and manage respiratory diseases and HIV/AIDS in resource-poor settings, piloted in the Free State in 2003, will blanket Western Cape primary health care clinics by the end of this year.

This is the confident prediction of both Dr Keith Cloete, Director of the TB/HIV/AIDS programme in the Western Cape and Dr Lara Fairall, Head of the Knowledge Translation Unit at the University of Cape Town's Lung Institute. The programme, a world first in practically applying a World Health Organization concept, is the brainchild of Fairall's unique unit. Her team focuses exclusively on health systems

research and promoting the uptake of findings in clinical practice.

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First developed as the Practical Approach to Lung Health in South Africa (PALSA), the programme uses an algorithm-based, user-friendly set of evidence-based guidelines outlining

symptoms to enable nurses to correctly diagnose and treat. Trainers, who in the Free State have since cascaded training out to 127 nurses in 16 facilities, provide at least eight short clinic-based sessions over several months, enabling nurses to stay on station and not aggravate the dire human resource crisis. The latest training focuses on the newer PALSA-PLUS programme that includes HIV treatment.

### Working smarter

Late last year the Free State, struggling to overcome bottlenecks caused by the severe shortage of doctors and the resultant choking of their ART roll-out, approached the Knowledge Translation



Unit to restructure the PALSAL PLUS programme.

Fairall's unit came up with a strategy consolidating uncomplicated ART-eligible adults to primary health care facilities where appropriately trained nurses can treat them, thus reserving the scarcer doctors for children and other more complex cases. The intervention, called STRETCH (streamlining tasks and roles to expand treatment and care for HIV), is being developed with Free State health workers and will be evaluated through a randomised controlled trial towards the end of the year.

In the Western Cape, which carries the highest TB load in the country (988 per 100 000) yet has arguably the best developed health care infrastructure, progress towards training nurse middle managers as outreach trainers has been somewhat quicker. By October last year, after the initial and intensive 5-week long 'Training the Trainer to Train' programme had been completed (59 nurses trained as outreach trainers), 687 newly skilled nurses were operating at 113 TB clinics in the province. This represents 40% coverage of all TB clinics in the province and is expected to reach 100% by year's end.

Cloete says TB cure rates in his province stand at about 70% for ordinary TB and 'in the low 30s' for multiple drug-resistant TB, by far the country's best figures (the national 'ordinary' TB cure rate is 55%). He said high case-load areas such as Khayelitsha, Nyanga and portions of Mitchell's Plain were being targeted for more resources.

One clinic in Khayelitsha has the same number of TB cases as the three entire districts in Cape Town. In 2005 over 2 000 cases of TB were registered at Khayelitsha's Site B clinic alone.

Epidemiologists believe the AIDS epidemic is fuelling the TB epidemic with 74% of TB patients in Khayelitsha also HIV positive. At Site B, 9 out of 10 TB patients are HIV positive.

## Detection rates way up

The Free State clinics have reported 70% improved TB detection and 80% improvement in asthma management since starting the basic PALSAL training. Next year the full programme will be expanded to help decentralise ART services in the two provinces, using the more efficient ART-friendly guidelines developed in the Free State.

In the meantime a team of nurse trainers are working flat out to reach all nurses in all primary care clinics in both provinces. Encouragingly, the programme has drawn attention from the human resources directorate of the national department of health.

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It is looking to expand the programme to other provinces and apply the Lung Institute's unique knowledge translation practices to other programmes.

Once again, responding to on-the-ground requests in the Western Cape, the Knowledge Unit is designing a fully integrated adult care guideline for managing adult chronic diseases, including diabetes and hypertension, for launch next year. Professor Eric Bateman, Director of the UCT Lung Institute, said that because South Africa had the highest co-infection rate of HIV and TB in the world (with TB being the leading cause of death among HIV-positive people), combining lung health training with HIV/ART treatment made 'complete sense and is urgently required'.

PALSAL PLUS wanted to use opportunities provided by the national ART roll-out to ensure that nurse training was strengthened and health services were improved, rather

than taking health care staff out of circulation, allowing the pandemic fuller reign.

The symptom-based guidelines include routine care before ART, prevention of TB and other opportunistic infections, PMTCT, VCT, prevention and treatment of STDs, cervical cancer screening, drug adherence counselling and health maintenance.

## Reducing pressure on hospitals

It is already being widely reported that patients attending clinics where nurses have received PALSAL training have dramatically fewer and shorter hospital admissions.

Referrals of serious cases improved by 120% in the Free State.

Dr Ronald Chapman, Executive Manager, Health Support in the Free State, said his nurses were picking up what doctors usually did, simply by using the guidelines properly.

Dr Fairall said on-site training, unlike the usual once-off centralised training, helped nurses feel supported and allowed for integration of learning and practice.

She quoted two nurses' remarks about their PALSAL Plus trainers. One had said: 'I found them accepting us...they try to reassure us, saying "No, we are there, whatever the trouble, you must phone me".' Another said she found time to 'go and revise'.

'It was one chapter a week and from one Tuesday to the next, you've seen many TB cases, you know, you've actually applied what you learnt. So it was actually better.'

*There were an estimated 20 000 people (adults and children) with stage IV HIV needing ART in the Western Cape at the end of last year. The province was able to help some 13 000.*

**Chris Bateman**