

Leaders in wellness - Transnet steps in to bridge healthcare gap

A social responsibility project undertaken by the Transnet Foundation to give back to communities, the award-winning Phelophepa healthcare train has affectionately become known by patients as a “train of hope” and a “train of miracles”.

Healthcare is a major concern for many South Africans, but especially for those living in the deeper rural areas. Most of these remote locations have very limited resources, and their distances from major urban areas place them at a serious disadvantage.

Four out of five South Africans depend on public health care, but access to hospitals and clinics remains a challenge. For many, a journey to the hospital is the longest and most expensive trip given the limitations in terms of our national infrastructure and financial affordability.

The South African railways stretch to some of the most rural parts of the country and Transnet owns and maintains an extensive part of this network. With this in mind, Transnet Foundation realised it could use this opportunity to help disadvantaged communities by creating something more than just transport. The Foundation created a rolling hospital in the form of the Phelophepa healthcare train.

Phelophepa travels the country nine months of the year, delivering top-quality healthcare, medical services and medication at very low prices and can treat, on average, 1 500 patients a week. This sort of affordable healthcare is possible through the assistance of student doctors who live on the train as well as volunteers.

“Phelophepa” is a combination of words from Sotho and Tswana and quite literally translates to “good clean health”. Good clean health is exactly what Phelophepa strives to provide.

The importance of this initiative becomes clear once one takes note of the distances rural patients have to walk in order to access some semblance of healthcare. South Africa has been able to bridge at least some of the gaps between rural and urban healthcare through the use of Phelophepa, a train that brings quality healthcare to the people.

The custom built train launched in 1994 and has since been delivering quality primary health care services and HIV/Aids prevention training to the rural masses. With both Phelophepa 1 and Phelophepa 2 running, this initiative can reach at least 380 000 people per year. But what is more impressive is that since its inception, Phelophepa has changed the lives of more than 20 million people.

“I greatly value the tremendous energy and inspired work that has driven this wonderful initiative to the success where it today features internationally as a shining example of healthcare delivery, empowerment and technology in a developing country,” says Archbishop-Emeritus Desmond Tutu, commenting on how Phelophepa has been able to improve the nation’s healthcare.

The train offers eye and dental care, screenings for diabetes and cancer as well as psychological counselling services, and an on-board pharmacy dispenses the necessary medication. Many of the services are free and where costs are involved, they are kept as low as possible.

The 18 coach train has 20 dedicated full time staff members as well as 40 volunteer students at any given time. The train has also been used for final year medical students to gain valuable experience. Annually, approximately 1 200 final-year students practice on-board Phelophepa.

The train's objective is not to provide quality mobile healthcare only, but to also offer opportunities for community upliftment. Active members in the community market the train's arrival to ensure that the surrounding areas are aware of when Phelophepa will be available. Community members are also employed to help with the setup for the train at each station.

The success of the first Phelophepa train has led to the launch of the second train, which took place in March 2012.

"The Transnet Foundation invests millions of Rands into socio-economic development opportunities with a strong emphasis on health, and we hope to inspire all South Africans to be more committed to uplifting our underprivileged communities," says the head of the Transnet Foundation, Cynthia Mgijima.