

Letters

The UFS Faculty of Health Sciences Faculty Forum: a Critical Evaluation by Heads of Department

To the Editor: Most faculties of health sciences at South African universities host annual research days at which staff and postgraduate students present their research projects. In 2005 we conducted a study to determine the profile of presentations at the annual two day Faculty Forum of the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Free State over the past five years.¹ Fluctuations were seen from year to year but it was found that the number of presentations had decreased in the period 2001 to 2005 from 80 to 69. In 2006 the number was down to 66. Furthermore it was found that only eight departments in the School of Medicine and two in the School for Allied Health Professions had at least one presentation at each forum during the period 2001 to 2005. To enable us to make recommendations so as to strengthen the Faculty Forum, the aim of this study was to determine the opinion of and approach to the forum of heads of department in the faculty.

This cross-sectional study had quantitative and qualitative components. A purposive stratified sample was used. In the School of Medicine the following selection was made:

- five heads of department randomly selected from the eight departments which were found to be annual forum participants in our previous study;
- all five heads of department of the five departments which never took part in the forum, and
- five heads of department randomly selected from the 18 departments with intermediate forum participation.

In the School for Allied Health Professions, the four heads of department were included. In the School of Nursing, the head of the school and two other appropriate staff members were included. From the Dean's Office the heads of the divisions of student learning and development and educational development were included.

For simplification we will use the term department throughout the remainder of the report, where the terms school or division would be more technically correct.

Information was collected through individual interviews conducted by the two researchers using a structured interview with some open-ended questions. Interviews were in Afrikaans or English, depending on the preference of the interviewee.

A pilot study was conducted with two heads of department not included in the sample, and the questionnaire adapted thereafter.

All respondents gave written informed consent before the interview. The protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Health Sciences and permission was obtained from the Vice-Rector Academic Planning of the UFS.

Results will be indicated for all 24 respondents but where differences between subgroups were found, these will be mentioned. All 24 participants indicated that the forum still has a place in the activities of the faculty. The most common motivation was because it provides an opportunity for young researchers to present their work (46%), and some respondents firmly stated that senior researchers should not present. Other comments were that the forum gives an opportunity for staff to see what is going on in the faculty, and that it is a showcase of the faculty.

Table I indicates the respondents' answers regarding who in their department always and who never presents at the Forum. In each case, the denominator used was the number of departments who had that specific category of staff member.

Table I: Types of presenters at Faculty Forum:

Who in the department always presents?	
Medical scientists	67%
Postgraduate students	50%
Lecturers	46%
Consultants	27%
Registrars	0%
Technologists	0%
Who in the department never presents?	
Technologists	75%
Registrars	38%
Consultants	27%
Lecturers	9%
Medical scientists	0%
Postgraduate students	0%

Just more than half of the respondents (54%) indicated that their department specifically prepares for the forum, mainly by discussing who will be presenting what. This happened more commonly in those departments who present at the forum regularly.

Only 14% of respondents indicated that clinical/routine work was cancelled on the two forum days, whereas the majority (58%) indicated that it was scaled down on those two days, and 29% indicated that the work had to carry on as usual. The latter departments were the ones who presented at the forum less frequently.

Only a third of respondents indicated that conference presentations of the department were always presented at the forum as well. The main reason for this not being done was the timing of the forum and conferences. Departments who regularly present at the forum were more likely to answer yes. Few respondents indicated that their conference presentations are inappropriate for forum presentation.

Only 4% of respondents did not agree that the Faculty Forum is declining, whereas 63% did, and 33% were unsure. The researchers who did agree that there was a decline gave the decline in attendance, and a general decline in research in the faculty as reasons. A list of possible factors contributing to the decline was presented to the respondents who felt that there was a decline. Around 60% indicated that the following were indeed contributing: a general lack of enthusiasm, too much routine work and teaching load, followed by insufficient infrastructure (mentioned by 40%). Private practice and use of free time were chosen as reasons less frequently.

Nearly half of the respondents (42%) indicated that their department experiences specific problems with regards to presentation at the Forum. This answer was associated with less participation. The most common reasons given for this were: too little time to do research, that they and their discipline are not seen as equal partners in the faculty, and issues relating to the ethics committee.

On the question of whether incentives would promote their department's participation at the forum, 46% of respondents said yes, 46% said no and 8% were unsure. Possible incentives could include: funding travel to enable researcher to give a presentation at a conference; a research assistant; a gift voucher; or that forum participation be viewed positively during staff evaluation.

Other themes that came to the fore in the open responses were the need for research assistants (25%), issues concerning the ethics committee (33%, all from the School of Medicine) and feeling isolated in terms of their area of research (21%).

From the responses it is clear that the forum must remain part of the activities of the faculty, and it was encouraging to note that in 2007, the number of presentations were on the increase again. It must, however,

be ensured that it is a forum for the whole faculty, and that researchers of all schools and divisions are seen as equal partners.

Although a common comment was that the forum was an ideal place for a young researcher to present, it was clear that registrars in the School of Medicine are not regular presenters. With the introduction of a compulsory research component in the MMed programme from 2008, registrars should be actively encouraged to present at the forum. The newly introduced prize for the best case presentation at the forum is a way of encouraging young researchers.

An evaluative study to determine the effectiveness of a primary school-based HIV/AIDS learning intervention on the knowledge of the learners

To the Editor: In July 2007 a pilot study was conducted to determine whether a book designed by the author, who was an MBChB V student at the time, to teach primary school children about HIV was successful in conveying important and difficult concepts in a way that enabled the children to understand and remember them. The participants included 32 grade seven learners from Emahhashini Primary School. Emahhashini is part of the Wembezi township in the Umtshezi municipality, Kwazulu Natal Midlands. Here HIV and AIDS are an everyday part of life. Many children in Emahhashini Primary School are either infected with HIV, or have family members suffering from the disease. HIV has become entwined in the traditions and cultural practices of people in the area. "Mass burials" are a weekly occurrence in the community as a result of AIDS-related deaths.

All learners were Zulu speaking but had English as their language of instruction. No selection process was used and all learners who were present on the first day were entered into the study. The usual Life Orientation lessons were used for this purpose.

Figure 1: This is the local cemetery and is commonly referred to as "the place where young girls are buried". Graves were being prepared for the following day.¹



The control data was based on written tests and discussion sessions. The discussions focused on six key terms discussed in the book. These terms were: ARVs, Resistance, Virus, HIV, DNA and T-cell. The control data stems from previous knowledge gained from Life Orientation classes on the school syllabus, and from general knowledge. There was a vast difference in test results among individual learners. This could be related to differences in knowledge of HIV, or due to differences in language ability. The Life Orientation content and other current education measures focus on the impact of HIV and how it can be prevented.¹ Whilst this is important, the aim of the book used in the study was to reinforce the existing material and, in addition, to create a more complete understanding of what the virus is, how it works and how it can be controlled.

The research infrastructure in the faculty needs attention. The call for applications for research assistance in the School of Medicine in November 2007 was definitely timely.

G Joubert

Department of Biostatistics, University of the Free State

HS Cronjé

Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, University of the Free State

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The new material was taught to the learners through reading and explanation of the book's concepts to the class in an interactive manner. Test and discussion sessions were held with all learners before and immediately after the intervention to look for improvements in the knowledge and understanding of the important concepts discussed in the book.

A significant improvement was seen in the written test as well as in the discussions. From virtually no knowledge of the mechanism of HIV and related concepts, the learners were able to understand these terms as well as remember them, showing that the book was a successful teaching tool. Seventy-eight per cent of the learners showed an improvement of more than 10%.

Table 1: Improvement groupings

Improvement (%)	0	10	20	30	40	70
No of learners	7	9	12	2	1	1

Key

%	Improvement in understanding
0	None
10	Slight
20	Moderate
30	Good
40	Excellent
> 50	Outstanding

Because there was only one grade seven class at this school, the class consisted of learners with varying levels of intelligence and literacy skills. However, an overall improvement indicates that learners at this level responded well to the book. This implies that the book should be equally successful with other grade seven learners with English as the language of instruction. Unfortunately, these results cannot be applied to learners outside of this demographic. A more detailed study will have to be done across different grade levels to establish from which age or grade this book is appropriate and effective.

Picture books explaining difficult, but important concepts in an interesting and understandable manner succeed in teaching these concepts in a way that enables young children to both understand and remember them. The content of the book succeeds in bridging the existing gap in HIV information taught to primary school children. The focus of the intervention is to ensure that children understand these fundamental concepts concerning HIV. As a result, material taught to them as part of the school curriculum, as well as from external sources, will be better understood. The intention of the book is to reinforce existing HIV/AIDS education, and create a more complete understanding of the virus by young children.

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Smith MRD, MBChB V student

Stellenbosch University

Correspondence to: 14100436@sun.ac.za

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Note: Many of the statements made were concluded from discussions with teachers and learners and from personal opinion.