

PRIMARY CARE IN ACTION

AN AIR OF EXCITEMENT RIPPLES THROUGH THE small group gathered at the rural station as the *Phelophepa* train belches noisily before applying its brakes. Personnel from local schools, the police, members of the local authority and the general public are all present to welcome the train.

Months of careful planning and preparation have come to fruition. Regional and local authorities have been involved, as have community organisations and local health practitioners. The train does not duplicate existing services, but provides information and highlights health promotion. However, the pressing health needs of people in the community means that a large component of the service deals with minor ailments. Many patients with chronic diseases will also visit the train.

Over the next five days the staff on the train will:

- spend over R8 000 locally on groceries;
- employ temporary interpreters, cleaners, labourers and a cashier from the community;
- see up to 1 700 patients with a variety of ailments;
- train 21 students selected by the community in a basic health education programme;
- test and screen eyes – and dispense spectacles;
- extract hundreds of teeth in advanced stages of decay;
- perform restorative dental procedures;
- take X-rays – finding TB in about 30% – as well as diagnosing the occasional fracture;
- screen schoolchildren's overall health, eyes, teeth and psychological status;
- provide appropriate life skills guidance for high school scholars (teenage pregnancy, study skills and career counselling are some of the issues addressed); and
- conduct workshops with local school principals, teachers and other professionals.



PHELO THE PEOP

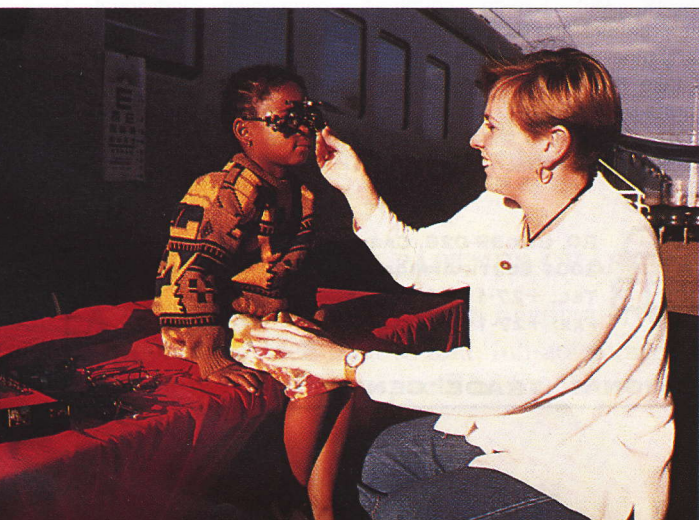
Compiled from reports by L

The debacle of Sarafina II has unfortunately been done in the primary care field. In this proj

Readers are invited to contribute short articles especially those of which our profession gener

Apart from a core of qualified permanent staff, final year and postgraduate students in fields such as nursing, optometry, dentistry and psychology obtain 'hands-on' experience while delivering the service. Hotel management and catering students ensure that the 'internal' operation runs smoothly and that staff are comfortable and well fed.

Students are supervised by lecturers from various institutions who usually volunteer a



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PHELPHEPA: PEOPLE'S TRAIN

by L Cingo, A Hefers and L Coetzee

overshadowed a great deal of effective work series we highlight examples of primary care projects at work

about effective primary care projects – ally may not be aware.

week of their time. No matter how unique or wonderful the facilities of the health train, the value of the service is dependent on the committed support of tertiary institutions, tutors, students and of course members of the respective communities.

Now in its fourth year of operation, the train operates for nine months of the year – a total of 37 five-day stop-overs.

Although health education is free, patients pay a nominal amount for the other services. Local taxi associations sometimes agree to transport passengers at a reduced rate.

Although the whole project has a 'campaign-like' nature, an ongoing after-effect has been noted. Professionals from regions visited previously report that increased numbers of patients attending existing services know more about their health needs and their own role in improving their health.

On the financial front, the operation is run like a small business. Monthly operating costs are roughly R350 000. Apart from Transnet, major supporting funders are: Roche Pharmaceuticals (community nurse's salary); Colgate-Palmolive (dental equipment and consumables); and Toshiba/Techmed (X-ray equipment).

The routes are designed to cover most rural areas of the country over a two-year period.

In conclusion, we quote Dr Mohammed Meer – a dental practitioner and lecturer at Wits Medical School:

'Phelophepa is an experience to be lived. It should become an integral and compulsory part of the curriculum of every health science student. The knowledge and experience gained cannot be matched by any conventional means of teaching at any educational institution. Furthermore, the social interaction between students of such diverse backgrounds, ensures that the whole encounter provides for an opportunity of a lifetime.'

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