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A South African strategy to improve surgery in low resource settings

South Africa is home to a large uninsured rural population where the severe disease prevalence, particularly of HIV/Aids and Tuberculosis (TB), is compounded by an overburdened and under resourced public health system. As the disease profile shifts to a more chronic representation, more specialist services are recommended for the appropriate and accurate diagnosis and treatment of compounding manifestations. The lack of resources for surgery in these settings results in lengthy waiting times and an often poor prognosis. There is a significant impact of disease on the quality of life of patients in rural areas as a result of the inability to access health care and treatment. Such scenarios delay the presentation of disease, and provoke prolonged rehabilitation and treatment which is difficult in geographically dispersed contexts.

As part of South Africa's plan for the decentralised management of the disease burden, as well as the strengthening of health care services for the National Primary Health Care approach, there is a need to ensure that previously underserved and isolated areas have access to quality health care. Human resources for health organisation Africa Health Placements works in collaboration with the South African National Department of Health to address the acute skills shortage in the health sector, build capacity in underserved areas of the country, and enable the health system to support its health workers. Foreign-qualified health professionals provide valuable additional capacity to the health system, improving distribution of human resources in previously disadvantaged areas.

South Africa presents an attractive and essential learning experience for health professionals to practise general surgical skills, including obstetric and orthopaedic care. In addition to this work there are opportunities to provide supportive supervision and management for other health workers, further enabling these professionals to make the greatest impact in delivering health services. South African national priorities in support of the health workforce include facilitating professional development programmes in rural districts, determining the optimum range of skills required for rural hospitals, and allowing for enhanced scopes of practice for health professionals in rural areas in district hospitals. Providing support and flexibility within these scopes creates a platform to address the skills needed in this environment. However, to realise the efforts of the health professionals within rural communities, there must be an increased tenure of stay. This time provides the health professional with the ability to learn the culture and fully develop their skills in medicine, anaesthetics and surgery. A stable and committed clinical staff allows for delivery of the required and prolonged management of care at a facility to improve outcomes of the HIV/Aids and TB-related disease burden.

The co-infection of HIV with TB and associated morbidities provides evidence for the need for specialist services to manage these complex cases. Retaining these critical personnel will support and retain resident staff and patients within health facilities. Delivery of strategic priorities and ensuring support for these health professionals will contribute to improving sustainable access to healthcare in underserved areas through an effective functioning South African public health system.