



## **Introducing Health Sciences: Visual Impairment**

*Treating Sight Loss in South Africa*

### **Commentary**

This train rides on some of the oldest track in South Africa and travels to some of the remotest regions. It's called Phelophepa, or the good health train. Its mission is to bring eye tests, spectacles, dental care and basic health services to poor communities in rural South Africa. Its philosophy: a nation without health is a nation without hope.

Dr Lillian Cingo used to work in England but she returned to South Africa where she was born to manage Phelophepa. Thirty-six weeks a year she lives on the train with a staff of forty health professionals and students in training. Phelophepa travels ten thousand miles a year to reach communities in need of healthcare, taking two years to cover the areas within reach of the railway track.

### **Dr Lillian Cingo**

In the west there are basic things that everybody expects and has. There's a doctor, a dentist, and yet here people wait for ten years, thirty years before they get seen, and the majority of people do live in these rural areas.

### **Commentary**

Black South Africans farmed this land successfully until about seventy years ago when the policy of apartheid forced over two million to resettle in overcrowded homeland areas where agriculture is difficult and jobs are scarce. Poverty and a lack of basic services have brought illness and disability to many in these communities where preventable conditions become chronic health problems because they remain untreated. In four weeks' time the train will arrive at the station at Thaba Nchu, or the black mountain.

Over half a million people live in this area in townships and villages up to fifty kilometres away from the train station. If they can get to Thaba Nchu they could receive treatment for common disorders, including eye infections and visual impairment caused by refractive errors. Conditions are hard in these communities. Some still don't have piped water and people have to fetch it from wells long distances away. What difference would Phelophepa really make to their lives?

Many in the Thabu Nchu area cannot afford basic health services such as eye and dental care, and medicines are costly. The train provides simple treatments at very low cost but it'll only be here for five days so people need to be told when it's coming.

### **Man**

So that it doesn't become a problem later on this is...

### **Commentary**

Community leaders and health workers set information networks in motion.

Man...

### **Commentary**

Television and print media aren't common here so it's word of mouth that counts.

Man...

### **Commentary**

People discover that the train can offer them affordable eye tests and dental treatment.

Man...

**Commentary**

Some have been waiting for years.

Man...

**Commentary**

Many of these older people lining up for their pensions will pay for health checks, eye tests and medicine from the train, not only for themselves but for other members of their extended family. The old age pension, small as it is, is one of the few sources of income in this area.

Community health workers encourage young people to go to the train if they have any health worries.

General chat...

**Commentary**

News of Phelophepa has spread far and wide by the time is due at Thaba Nchu.

General chat + singing...

**Commentary**

Healthcare staff are arriving at the train. They're final year students in optometry, dentistry, nursing and psychology. Many have had little or no experience of how people live outside the cities. Part of the train's mission is to expose these future healthcare professionals to the needs of rural communities in South Africa. Another aim is to give people from different backgrounds the chance to work together and to share the same vision for the two weeks they're on the train.

**Dr Lillian Cingo**

So this train is about working together, this train is about teamwork, this train is about sharing, this train is about sacrifices, this train is about information giving, on this train we want everybody to be treated with dignity and respect. We want them to feel and know that they matter.