

MIND THE GAP

Many who have travelled overseas and used the London underground are familiar with the automated voice recording “Mind the Gap” ensuring that no one steps into the danger zone between train and platform. The primary role of the diabetes educator is to safely bridge the gap, between the patient with diabetes who stands on the side doing nothing, and that same patient who now climbs on the train, to a new way of living, with a new mind set and appropriately empowered to utilise all of the resources available.

There is a distinct “gap” in South Africa between service availability. Certain areas provide sophisticated diabetes services and yet in other areas there is a large dark hole of service absence. There are many reasons why patients are unable to access services or are compromised in the service that they receive. These include limited financial and human resources, lack of understanding of their condition, resistance to change, physical lack of proximity to health services but most importantly, the lack of access to skilled diabetes educators.

Diabetes educators are required at grass roots level. They are required to reinforce and operationalise the information that has been delivered to them by the doctor or physician. They also have to be able to independently assess and educate the patient. They refer patients to other members of the multidisciplinary team, as necessary.

Buyelwa Dlangamandla, a diabetes nurse educator, has been performing outreach in rural communities within South Africa with her “Agents of Change” programme. She has run numerous programmes, influencing many people, mainly nursing sisters and patients, in various outlying areas in the Western Cape and Kwazulu-Natal (KZN). Buyelwa has recently been chosen to represent the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) on the education team as the African delegate. This is indeed an honour and we support her in her undertakings.

DESSA, the Diabetes Education Society of South Africa was formed 1986 under the umbrella of SEMDSA. From a small initiative DESSA now has a membership of approximately 250 members, predominantly in the Western Cape, Gauteng and KZN. However DESSA is slowly making inroads into Limpopo Province, Orange Free State, Mpumalanga and the Eastern Cape. Membership in the Northern Cape and the North West provinces remains a challenge.

The aim of DESSA is encapsulated in the mission statement of the constitution:

- To demonstrate leadership in diabetes education.
- **To provide access to expertise in diabetes education to individuals with diabetes, their families, the community, and health professionals.**
- To strive toward the incorporation of diabetes education into the National Health Policy.
- To support the development of culturally relevant educational strategies.
- To develop standards for diabetes education.
- To contribute to knowledge and research related to diabetes education.

Education is the primary method to bridge the gap between poor management and good management of diabetes. DESSA has developed its own training manual and three day training programme. Facilitators have run courses in Bloemfontein, KZN and the Western Cape. The three day programme will be supplemented with an advanced programme for those desiring to become registered with DESSA as accredited diabetes educators. This will include completion of a required number of diabetes clinical hours, assignments and mentorships.

The cloud of Occupation Specific Dispensation (OSD) continues to dominate diabetes education. OSD has lured capable and qualified diabetes educators out of the diabetes field into appropriately remunerated nursing specialities. Diabetes education is not recognised by the South African Nursing Council (SANC) as a speciality. Numerous initiatives are presently being undertaken to establish a course registered with SANC for diabetes educators. This will serve to benefit diabetes education in the future, as health facilities will be able to attract and retain diabetes educators.

As my term of office as chair of DESSA comes to a close, I hand over to Jeannie Berg confident that the priorities established will continue to be addressed. DESSA will continue to “mind the gap” and use education to empower health professionals and patients to safely embark on their own journey of health.

Amanda Went
Chairman
DESSA

Correspondence to: Sr Amanda Went, e-mail: awent@pgwc.gov.za