

The Rural Doctor of the Year (PIERRE JAQUES AWARD) – “It is actually fun”

In a context where there are many bad-news stories, it is important that we recognise and celebrate good news. The stories of many dedicated rural doctors who provide amazing care to communities in need are seldom told. The Rural Doctors Association of Southern Africa (RuDASA) inaugurated an annual award for the rural doctor of the year in 2002, to acknowledge some of those unsung heroes.

The award is presented to a rural doctor, working at the coal face, who made a significant contribution towards rural health in the previous year. The award was named after Dr Pierre Jaques, a founder member of RuDASA and a doyen of rural practice in South Africa. He spent most of his working life at Elim Hospital in rural Limpopo province and was a tireless advocate for rural health and the role of the rural doctor in South Africa. The award is presented jointly by RuDASA, the HIV Clinicians' Society and the Rural Health Advocacy Project.

The award was again presented at the 17th Annual Rural Health Conference in St Lucia on 9 August 2013.

The Pierre Jaques award for 2013 was awarded to a doctor couple, Ben and Taryn Gaunt, from Zithulele hospital in the Eastern Cape. The past year has seen some outstanding achievements at Zithulele, including the first cataract operations as part of the Mercy Ships Eastern Cape Mercy Vision Project (there are now cataract lists every 2 weeks at the hospital), a year-on-year perinatal mortality rate that has dropped to under 20 deaths per thousand (a remarkably low number for a rural district hospital), survival for the first time of extremely premature babies with birth-weights of under 1000g (five in total since September 2012 with the record standing at 900g), the award of nearly R2 million from the Anglo American Chairman's Fund and the Discovery Foundation to build more accommodation for professionals, a dramatic expansion of the ARV programme to more than 4000 patients with the majority of them collecting their treatment at their local clinic and the first hearing aids being fitted at the hospital.

Dr Karl le Roux, who nominated them, said: “Ben and Taryn would be the first to contest that the achievements of the past year are entirely due to the remarkable team of doctors, nurses, therapists and many others that work at Zithulele. Yet, the existence of this team is in large part due to their obedience to what they felt was God's call for them to work in rural medicine when they were still students. They themselves are an amazing team – Ben, an excellent clinician, visionary clinical manager and gifted administrator with incredible drive and focus, Taryn, a perfect counterfoil to Ben's work-aholism, as a homeschooling mom of four kids, and a compassionate clinician with a love for paediatrics and impressive expertise in paediatric TB and HIV.

Ben reflected on the fact that the health system needs good leaders as well as good followers to make it work, and that every individual is an important member of the team.

The provincial rural doctor of the year is dr Kobus Viljoen from Mseleni Hospital in KwaZulu-Natal. He was nominated because of his willingness to go the extra mile for patients. He has been at the hospital for 10 years and speaks isiZulu fluently. In his acceptance speech, he said, “It is actually fun”. He acknowledges that working in a rural hospital can be stressful, but that there is an inherent worth that makes it meaningful. He enjoys the diversity of the work, and is convinced that there is something in our human makeup that thrives on being challenged. He enjoys the common humanity one experiences in a consultation and says that it is important to laugh with patients, to make them feel cared for.

Prof Elisabeth Weiss was awarded a long service award for her tireless work in Limpopo province, where she established outreach and training in psychiatry as well as forensic psychiatric services. Before she established the forensic service in Limpopo in 1998, patients requiring forensic psychiatric assessment had to be sent to Pretoria. A colleague described her

as such: “one wonders how she does it, travelling to almost the whole of Limpopo doing community based work, she is one of her kind. She pioneered the whole service but she still works continuously with passion as if she started yesterday.”

The selection committee had a difficult task, as excellent nominations were received from different provinces. Professor Steve Reid spoke at the conference about the values that health professionals in rural areas hold in common: social justice, a commitment to a community, teamwork, patient relationships, making a difference (agency), being part of a community, a sense of identity and a love of open spaces. Those values were clearly described in the nominations and embodied in the award recipients.