

# ‘Blood sugars’: Using drama to meet the challenge of diabetes

‘Blood Sugars’ is a three-year project supported by a **Wellcome Trust International Engagement Grant**, which aims to improve our understanding of types 1 and 2 diabetes in an urban South African context, by creating a healthier dialogue between patients, healthcare and research professionals, and a broader ‘at-risk’ public.

It is a Gauteng-based collaboration between the Health Communication Research Unit and Drama for Life (both based at the University of the Witwatersrand) and Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital’s (CHBAH) diabetes clinic.

The Health Communication Research Unit is a multidisciplinary research group concerned with the unique challenges of cross-cultural, cross-linguistic communication in health care contexts. The Unit’s research aims to inform policy and provide practical guidelines for training with the health professions. Drama for Life works to improve dialogue for social transformation – through research, teaching and learning, and community engagement – using a multitude of different dramatic techniques and approaches designed in response to specific needs and contexts.

The two units have previously collaborated very successfully in other clinical contexts, focusing particularly on HIV and AIDS. Drama was used to bring together multidisciplinary clinical teams and their patients, with the ultimate result of building confidence and adherence in those receiving treatment, and improving communication between patients and healthcare professionals.

In the case of diabetes, research suggests that the complexity of the condition, combined with the time and resource pressures faced by healthcare providers, means that people living with the condition often do not fully understand the way in which diabetes is working in the body. They may thus struggle with the considerable challenges presented by the treatment regimen of medication, ‘diet’ and exercise (e.g. Burkett 2012, Hjelm et al. 2012, Zeh et al. 2012).

The CHBAH diabetes clinic is a national leader in terms of its work with diabetes education – specialist diabetes nurse educators are an integral part of the clinical team, and the hospital also organises regular peer education sessions, and weekend camps for younger people living with type 1 diabetes to learn from and support each other.

Our aim is to use drama interventions to support the work already being done in the clinic, and to extend its reach beyond the walls of CHBAH.

Our two main tools will be drama workshops in the clinic itself, which will begin towards the end of 2015, and will eventually form the basis of a new play, which will be

performed in clinics, schools, and other public spaces from 2016. The play will be co-devised by people attending the clinic, healthcare professionals, and professional dramatists. We hope to work with DESSA (the Diabetes Education Society of South Africa) to help stage the play as widely as possible. The play will present an opportunity to hear different voices and opinions – in particular those of the people who are facing the challenge of balancing the management of the condition with their normal daily lives. It will also be an opportunity to develop a more recognisable picture of the challenges presented by diabetes both to health professionals and researchers, and to people who are living with the condition. Lastly, we hope to make a film of the project will help us further disseminate our approach and findings, in 2017 and beyond.

Diabetes is one of the world’s fastest-growing health problems. In South Africa, it is estimated that 8.4 % of the population have diabetes (International Diabetes Federation, 2014). With a population of nearly 55 million people, around 4.6 million South Africans may have the condition, with up to two-thirds being undiagnosed (International Diabetes Federation, 2015). And, these figures are on the rise. Considering its prevalence, diabetes is relatively poorly understood by the general public, leading to all sorts of associated social problems like stigma, which of course makes living with the condition all the more tricky. We hope that our approach will present a real and supportive picture of diabetes to people who are newly diagnosed, to clinicians and to the wider public.

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**References available on request**



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