

Students develop diagnosis app for deaf people

Cost-effective solutions to help deaf people navigate healthcare in developing countries is exactly what Banele Mhlongo and Vuma Mthembu, fourth-year medical students at the University of Cape Town (UCT), are trying to achieve with the app they are developing.



Banele Mhlongo and Vuma Mthembu. Photo: Robyn Walker

For people who are deaf, dealing with public services such as police stations or healthcare facilities without a sign-language interpreter can be stressful or at worst potentially dangerous. They are less likely to make use of healthcare facilities due to communication barriers, which can lead to an incorrect diagnosis or less than satisfactory treatment options.

The two students believe that communicating with the deaf is a vital aspect to create stronger health systems. Already, there is a strong focus on communication with patients at the UCT Health Science Faculty, where students learn isiXhosa and Afrikaans to ensure that patients can understand and respond to relevant questions when obtaining a medical history.

"We saw the gap after realising that the deaf community has no alternative language other than sign, as lip-reading is insufficient. And when examining, about 70% of a diagnosis comes from the patient's history," Mhlongo explains.

Video clips

To remedy the situation, the two are developing an app and website where symptoms, treatment and medication for common medical conditions are explained. To start the project, they have chosen the most common diseases currently affecting South African patients, such as HIV/Aids, tuberculosis, diabetes, asthma and meningitis.

On the website and consequently on the app, sign-language interpreters and health professionals are explaining via video everything you need to know about asthma for instance. Short video clips explain what can trigger an asthma attack, how it can be treated and why it is important to avoid non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and how to deal with their side effects.

Mhlongo and Mthembu are using Instagram to engage with a younger deaf audience by posting pictures and meme-styled short, humorous captioned images, explaining the most common health conditions.

They are eager to expand their project and are looking for supporters to fully development this important innovation, ensuring healthcare access for all in South Africa.

“Our aim is to pioneer sign-language teaching for all programmes in the medical school, and to get other institutions to adopt it,” Mhlongo concludes.

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