

# CLINICAL ASSOCIATES



A New Kind of  
Health Professional  
in South Africa



**“Clinical Associates will be competent, professional members of the public healthcare sector. They have the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to function effectively in the district health system, primarily working under the supervision of qualified medical practitioners, to assist with emergency care, procedures, and inpatient care.”**

– Dr. Aaron Motsoaledi, National Minister for Health, South Africa.

**“In the Eastern Cape where our Clinical Associates are working, patients often travel great distances to go to hospital because local healthcare clinics are so understaffed. The Clinical Associates will help the doctors by relieving their workload, which will allow doctors to focus on more complex cases. Patients will be treated sooner and closer to their homes and that will help reduce the disease burden in South Africa and help improve overall patient outcomes.**

– Prof. Khaya Mfenyana, Executive Dean,  
Faculty of Health Sciences, Walter Sisulu University.

**“Clinical Associates will play a vitally important role in rural healthcare. From the outset, rural doctors have welcomed this new cadre of workers and have looked forward to working with them. Their support of the team in rural district hospitals will ensure better care for patients and will also enable doctors to engage in greater outreach to clinics.”**

– Prof. Ian Couper, Director,  
Centre for Rural Health, University of the Witwatersrand.

**“The Faculty is proud of the quality of its Clinical Associate Programme, and of the standards achieved by the first cohorts of students. We look forward to the graduates playing a vital role in ensuring access to quality care for all South Africans.”**

– Prof. Eric Buch, Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Pretoria.

## Providing Quality Care to People in Need

In many rural parts of South Africa, people have extremely limited access to quality healthcare services. This is largely due to weak district health systems and a severe lack of trained human resources for health. For the country as a whole, the doctor-to-population ratio is estimated to be 0.77 per 1,000. Because 73 percent of all general practitioners work in the private sector, however, there is just one practicing doctor per every 4,219 people for the vast majority of the population.

In response, the South African National Department of Health began to explore different avenues of increasing the number of skilled healthcare providers available in underserved provinces. In 2004, they assembled a National Task Team to establish a scope of practice, training curriculum, and exit outcomes for a new mid-level healthcare provider and the Clinical Associates profession was born.

Similar to Physician Assistants in the United States and other mid-level cadres in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, Clinical Associates are university-trained medical professionals who work primarily at district hospitals throughout South Africa. They are an integral member of the clinical team, working under the supervision of doctors to provide medical services ranging from taking patient histories and performing routine examinations to providing emergency care for acute conditions and managing chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, and HIV/AIDS.

Clinical Associates are competent, professional members of the healthcare team. They are armed with the knowledge, training, skills, and commitment necessary to function effectively within the district health system in South Africa.

The Clinical Associate Programmes are offered in partnership with national and provincial departments of health, as well as the South African Military Health Service (SAMHS).







## What Qualifies a Clinical Associate to Practice?

Clinical Associates are required to earn a Bachelor of Clinical Medical Practice from an accredited university to qualify for registration with the Health Professions Council of South Africa.

Rooted in problem-based learning, this 3-year course of study emphasizes the acquisition of hands-on clinical skills that Clinical Associates need to take their place as essential members of district-level care teams. The rigorous, nationally standardized curriculum is competency-based. It prepares students to provide any medical service within their scope of practice that is delegated to them by the supervising medical practitioner.

During their initial year of study, Clinical Associate students spend the early part of their first semester learning clinical theory and practice on the Medical Campus, with a strong focus on learning how to take a detailed patient history and conduct a clinical examination. For the remainder of the three years, students learn through actual practice at clinical sites — mostly hospitals in rural settings. The training Clinical Associates receive prepares them to provide a broad range of medical care, including but not limited to:

- Obtaining patient histories
- Performing physical exams
- Ordering diagnostic or therapeutic procedures
- Interpreting findings and diagnosing common emergency conditions
- Developing and implementing a treatment plan
- Monitoring efficacy of therapeutic interventions
- Assisting with surgeries
- Providing patient education and counseling
- Making appropriate referrals for specialized care



Located in Eastern Cape Province, Walter Sisulu University is one of three historically black South African universities established in the so-called 'independent homelands' during the twilight years of apartheid. Its Medical Faculty was established in 1985. Striving to be a leading African university, Walter Sisulu implements comprehensive and innovative educational, research, and community partnership programs that are responsive to local, regional, and national development priorities while at the same time cognizant of continental and international imperatives.

Walter Sisulu's programmes are rooted in problem-based learning, community-based education, and community partnerships to better improve the quality of life of all the people served. Its Medical Faculty is internationally recognized as one of eight medical schools in the world that are champions of social accountability in health professions education. As such, Walter Sisulu's educational programmes feature a strong community service component. They also place a special emphasis on primary health care and sustainable rural development. Medical training is highly integrated with community linkages through the Academic Health Complex of the Eastern Cape, which comprises all of the tertiary hospitals in the province, some of the district hospitals, and academic primary health centers.

Walter Sisulu University was the first institution in South Africa to commence training through the Clinical Associate Programme by accepting its first cohort of 23 students in January 2008. All 23 obtained their degrees and were graduated from the programme in May 2011. Its second cohort of 24 students graduated in May 2012. A third cohort of 22 students will graduate at the end of 2012, while the fourth cohort of 32 students will complete their course of study at the end of 2013. In 2012, 32 new students entered the programme.

With the goal of ensuring that its Clinical Associate students stay and serve in the rural areas where they are most needed, Walter Sisulu's admissions process favors individuals of rural origin because studies have repeatedly shown that the main determinant of rural practice is the background of the student.

For more information about Walter Sisulu's programme, please contact Dr. Mukund Khatri-Chhetry, Clinical Associate Programme Coordinator, at [mkhatri-chhetry@wsu.ac.za](mailto:mkhatri-chhetry@wsu.ac.za).



“I began working as a **Clinical Associate** at Victoria Hospital on Jan. 3, 2011. There are only eight doctors, so I know that they really appreciate the work we are doing here. I think the training I received at Walter Sisulu has prepared me to make a difference. That is important to me because I want to be recognized as a skilled professional within the hospital. It’s also my goal to help improve the quality of care for people, especially the elderly and those with chronic conditions like HIV who live in rural areas.”

– Sihle Lawana, Clinical Associate at Victoria Hospital in Alice, Eastern Cape Province, and graduate of Walter Sisulu University’s first cohort of Clinical Associate students.



**"I knew I wanted to be in the medical field helping people and, in particular, to gain experience in the rural health setting. This new **Clinical Associate Programme** seemed interesting and was my first step in being able to do this. We have had a fair share of learning medical theory and practice, along with how to apply it in the clinical setting. The programme is designed for us to work in the community and I am hopeful this will be a benefit to the community, as well as to our fellow healthcare workers and patients."**

– Alysson James (center), pictured as a 3rd year Clinical Associate student at the University of the Witwatersrand. Ms. James graduated in December 2011 and is currently working as a Clinical Associate at Heidelberg Hospital in Mpumalanga Province.



The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) is situated in Johannesburg, the social and economic hub of South Africa. With a strong reputation built on research and academic excellence, Wits is one of only two universities in Africa ranked as a leading world institution of higher education. The Wits Faculty of Health Sciences has a high reputation for scholarship in health sciences teaching, research, and clinical service. It provides undergraduate, postgraduate, and professional training — particularly in the South African and sub-Saharan context — offering modern and relevant curricula and facilities, with national and international reputations.

The Clinical Associate Programme at Wits is offered in collaboration with the National, North West, and Gauteng Departments of Health. Students enrolled in the programme develop a sound knowledge of the medical and clinical sciences so they have a concrete understanding of health conditions and associated management strategies.

Teaching occurs mainly at district hospitals and is generally done by family practitioners who integrate theory and practice to assure students acquire the necessary hands-on skills they need to perform clinical procedures. Teaching is patient-centered and problem-based with a strong emphasis on independent, self-directed learning. Furthermore, the programme is organised into courses designed to produce the defined outcomes with the first year of study focusing on individual health, the second focusing on family health, and the final year focusing on applied clinical practice and the hospital's role within the community. The spiral arrangement in which materials are delivered reinforces what was previously learned and introduces new information at a deeper or higher level when students have the appropriate knowledge.

The Clinical Associate Programme at Wits began in 2009 with the first cohort of 25 students, all of whom graduated at the end of 2011. Wits currently has 139 students enrolled in the BCM Programme; 29 are in their third year. Intakes are now approximately 60 students per year.

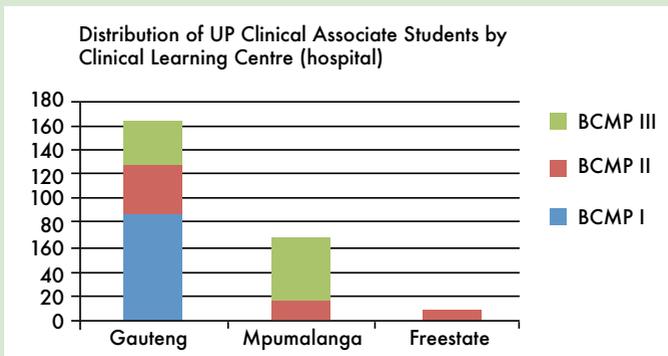
While the admissions process at Wits favors individuals from North West and Gauteng Provinces, where the university places students for practical training, the university enrolls students from any region of South Africa in its Clinical Associate Programme.

For more information about the University of the Witwatersrand's programme, please contact Dr. Audrey Gibbs, Clinical Associate Programme Coordinator, at [audrey.gibbs@wits.ac.za](mailto:audrey.gibbs@wits.ac.za).

The University of Pretoria is the leading research university in South Africa and one of the largest in the country. It is at the forefront of tertiary education and collaborates with world-class partners to ensure continued excellence in learning and teaching.

The Faculty of Health Sciences is recognized nationally and internationally as an outstanding institution in terms of its education of health professionals, its research, and its clinical service. It is an institution with a tradition of excellence and a proud history yet it is committed not only to making history, but also making the future. At the University of Pretoria Faculty of Health Sciences, students learn to make a life, make a living, and make a difference. Graduates become community leaders that are distinct in their ability to think, communicate, and contribute.

The University of Pretoria launched its Clinical Associate Programme in 2009 and the first cohort of 44 students graduated at the end of 2011. The second cohort of 87 students started in 2010 and will graduate at the end of 2012. And the third cohort of 69 students started in 2011 and will graduate at the end of 2013. In total, approximately 290 students have been enrolled in the University of Pretoria's Clinical Associate Programme as of June 2012.



The University of Pretoria's admissions process favours individuals from Mpumalanga and Gauteng, where students gain practical experience through placements at district hospitals. Clinical training is also conducted through the SAMHS. The University of Pretoria enrolls students from any region of South Africa in its Clinical Associate Programme.

For more information about the University of Pretoria's programme, please contact Dr. J. Murray Louw, Clinical Associate Programme Coordinator, at [murray.louw@up.ac.za](mailto:murray.louw@up.ac.za).



**“For me, being a Clinical Associate is not just a profession, but a calling. I love helping people and my work actually gives me a chance to be part of their lives. The look on the patients’ faces when I first walked into the Outpatient Department waiting area made me realise just how much this new profession is needed in our country because we don’t have enough healthcare workers. I know that we are making a difference in the community and reducing the workload for our fellow healthcare professionals. ”**

– Xolisile Dlamini (pictured on the right), a 3rd year Clinical Associate student at the University of Pretoria and stationed at Kalafong Hospital in Gauteng Province for practical training.

## Partnering to Strengthen Training of Clinical Associates

With the generous support of the American people, the American International Health Alliance's HIV/AIDS Twinning Center has established partnerships linking each of these universities with counterpart institutions in the United States. Funding for these partnerships and all related activities is provided by the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and CDC/South Africa through a cooperative agreement with the US Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA).

The University of Colorado Medical School's Child Health Associate/Physician Assistant Programme has long demonstrated a commitment to building global partnerships that advance healthcare service provision to patients, families, and communities. The Physician Assistant Programme brings more than 40 years of experience successfully addressing the challenges related to establishing an innovative curriculum for mid-level professionals to the partnership. This knowledge and experience is playing a critical role in strengthening the Clinical Associate Programme at Walter Sisulu University.

Emory University School of Medicine has a strong history of providing care to medically underserved areas through required rotations in rural areas of Georgia and service-learning programs in resource-challenged clinics outside of Atlanta. Emory's Physician Assistant Programme is working with their counterparts at the University of Witwatersrand to strengthen the Clinical Associate Programme there.

Arcadia University's Physician Assistant Programme — which culminates in a Master of Medical Science degree — is designed to produce graduates who are well-equipped to deliver high-quality, cost-effective primary health care in a wide variety of settings, including hospitals, clinics, doctors' offices and other community settings. Arcadia offers a dual degree program with public health and

### HIV/AIDS Twinning Center Clinical Associate Partnerships in South Africa

**Walter Sisulu University / University of Colorado School of Medicine**  
Established February 2010



**University of the Witwatersrand / Emory University, Atlanta**  
Established June 2010



**University of Pretoria / Arcadia University, Glenside (Pennsylvania)**  
Established February 2011



taps into its strong ties with regional medical communities, as well as international global health experiences, to provide students with a foundation for professional growth through personal attention, global perspective, and a commitment to excellence. Arcadia is partnering with the University of Pretoria to strengthen their Clinical Associate Programme.

Together, with Twinning Center support, partners are working to build the institutional and human resource capacity needed to ensure the Clinical Associate Programmes at each South African university thrives, expands, and serves as a model for possible replication on a national level. The Twinning Center is also fostering collaboration among these partnerships, as well as with other key stakeholders, thereby contributing to the development of this innovative pre-service training program that is providing much-needed human resources for health in South Africa.

**South African provinces where Clinical Associate students are being placed for hands-on practical training and/or employed within the health system upon graduation.**





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IN PARTNERSHIP TO FIGHT HIV/AIDS

