

20th Anniversary Celebration - speeches

Health Economics Unit
University of Cape Town
Venue: Centre for the Book, Cape Town
Date: 20 April 2010

Welcome by HEU Director: Dr Sue Cleary

Friends and colleagues, my name is Sue Cleary and I am the director of the Health Economics Unit. I am delighted to welcome you to our 20th anniversary celebration and would like to extend an especially warm welcome to:

- Our colleagues from UCT
- Our research partners and collaborators
- Policymakers
- Graduates
- Past and present staff of the HEU
- And friends and family.

I would also like to acknowledge those who have travelled to be with us today. We are so pleased that you could make it.

Before I hand over to the main speakers of this evening, I just want to say a few words about teaching, as to me this is one of the most rewarding aspects of my work at the unit.

For those of you who don't know, health economics is a relatively new discipline. So, when the health economics unit was founded 20 years ago, there were almost no people with skills in health economics on the African continent.

After the 1994 elections, our first priority in the unit was to train senior South African health managers, in order to equip them with the skills that are needed to transform the South African health system. This was followed in 1996 with the initiation of Masters level training in health economics, in collaboration with the School of Economics, and later in collaboration with the School of Public Health.

Later efforts included a PhD programme and most recently, we started a part-time distance learning postgraduate diploma in health economics.

The breadth of our training programmes in health economics remains unique on the African continent; today we are proud to have trained over 150 people.

We are also proud of the diversity of our alumni – in Africa alone our graduates are from 20 different countries, from Ghana in the West, to Mauritius in the East and Somalia in the North. Over the years we have had graduates from pretty much every East and Southern African country.

This diversity in the nationalities of our students makes teaching health economics exciting and sometimes challenging. It is not uncommon for a typical class at the HEU to include students

from the poorest countries in the world working side by side with students from countries like Norway and the United States.

We are also privileged in terms of the calibre of our students, which makes teaching at the HEU a learning experience for both staff and students. A recent survey of our graduates found that many are currently working as policymakers, or in international organizations including the World Health Organisation, the World Bank and others.

Many are also working as researchers at universities and I am very impressed to hear about the efforts they are making to initiate health economics training programmes in other African universities. All in all, I find teaching to be one of the most rewarding parts of my job and it has been my privilege to be involved as a member of staff at the HEU over the past 9 years.

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It now gives me great pleasure to introduce you to the Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, Dr Max Price who will be talking about the importance of research in policymaking.

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It now gives me great pleasure to introduce you to Prof Gavin Mooney of the HEU. Gavin's work as one of the founders of health economics was recently acknowledged when he was awarded an honorary doctorate by UCT. Gavin, thanks once again for all you have done to support the HEU.

A final word of thanks to our colleagues at the HEU who have been working so hard to organise this evening. First and foremost, I would like to thank Allison Stevens who has really had a mountain of work to do in the past few weeks. I would also like to thank Latiefa and Sue who continue to make the unit function so smoothly and everyone else who has pitched in with all the last minute arrangements.

Finally, thanks to everyone once again for coming tonight. We hope that you enjoy the rest of the evening with us.

Speech by Honorary Professor: Gavin Mooney

VC, Sue, Di, brother and sister HEU-ites, Ladies and Gentlemen, friends

For me it is quite stunning to be asked to give this talk this evening. I feel most privileged as I know there are many in this audience who would want to speak in appreciation of the work of HEU and the staff of HEU. But I am sure you will do so informally to Sue and Di and other HEU-ites.

Before I go further however – and on behalf of every one here - I want to thank Allison for all her efforts in organising this birthday party. I do not have any influence around the place - as you well know Allison - but I am sure we are all knocking at an open door in appealing to Sue to give Allison the day off tomorrow. A big thanks Allison.

The Faculty and the Department have been big friends of HEU and that friendship is personified by Marian and Leslie.

But let me now turn to Max. To me one of the great things about HEU is the fact that there is such emphasis placed on social justice. This applies both in health care but also in society more generally where the social determinants of health can have such an impact for good and bad on population health.

On an earlier visit to UCT I was much taken by the fact that the VC wrote to all staff and students encouraging them to get out on to the streets in protest against the actions of government which were undermining efforts to build a more socially just society. That is not the sort of thing Australian university VCs get up to.

Just as UCT can be seen as seeking to promote social justice in this society, it is then right and proper that UCT is the home of the HEU. That might seem an odd way of talking about a bunch of pointed headed economists who worship at the altar of costing and efficiency. These are not exactly the sorts of words one might use to encourage protest marches or marchers. “What do we want?” Efficiency! “When do we want it?” Not until the present value of the benefits outweighs the present value of the costs!

But the reason I raise social justice is that it is this that permeates so much of the work of HEU. I will come back to that.

And I might mention in passing that in researching for this little talk, I came across a paper published by SP Taylor and a certain DE McIntyre, published way back when HEU was just starting up. It is interesting that it was on the economics of cigarette smoking. Now this is a quite remarkable article in many ways but let me mention just two. First I know of no other article that has shown that the benefits of smoking are greater than the costs. Secondly to arrive at this result required the adoption of a most original methodology which I have never ever come across before – totally unique.

For the cognoscenti, let me explain. It required a discount rate of 20%, an assumption that for every packet of cigarettes smoked there was 0.745 of a whole time equivalent job created, that smoke had positive externalities and that if doctors were treating cancer patients the opportunity cost was negative – because they were thereby prevented from doing more harm

elsewhere. That by the way is not manipulation; it is simply a recognition of the need for value judgements in economics.

HEU is a very special place to work. Just quite why I have difficulty putting my finger on. It is partly because it is African and this continent desperately needs health economics – there are such massive health problems and there are such limited resources. What challenges!

It is partly because it is South African and it is faced with all the problems that South Africa faces today in society at large, in its poverty and inequality, in its health and wellbeing. It also has the advantages of being South African – this is an enormously resilient and vibrant society. It is quite astonishing as a visitor here to experience that vibrancy. Del and I want to bottle it and take some of it home to some of our laid back, apathetic Aussie mates.

It is partly more local still as it is based at UCT.

But it is also I think primarily because of the people in HEU – the HEU-ites! Di is very special and the directors who have followed her - Steve Thomas and Michael Thiede - were as well. And Sue, the current director, is an enormous asset to HEU. And Lucy Gilson is such a great leader in research to have in HEU.

A great bunch of leaders showing charismatic leadership.

As I age, I recognise more and more in so many walks of life the need for good leadership. We all need led – we need to be inspired to go that extra mile. The key secret of HEU's success? It has and has had good leadership in abundance.

But it is not just the leaders of HEU to whom we must raise our glasses this evening but also the led. The climate of commitment to do good works pervades the whole ethos of HEU and every member of its staff. It means that HEU is quite simply a lovely place to come into in the morning – and be welcomed by Latiefa's smile and the warmth of HEU's Zuma – Sue Ma - cutchon that is.

What is also very different in HEU as compared with other health economics units I have worked in is the role of the unit in policy circles. The fact that Di was involved professionally and personally in the struggles is something that still resonates with those in the ANC who fought against apartheid and who still cherish the values that led that fight. The work of the HEU is thus highly respected and the unit has an entrée to government circles that many would give their eye teeth for.

Nowhere is that more evident than in Sue's work on HIV/AIDS and Di's on the NHI. And of course in both of these what drives them is a concern for social justice. And Di's work and that of the unit was recognised last year when Di received the UCT_Social Responsiveness award.

But I also want to go back a little in time. There have been two other directors of HEU - Steve Thomas and Michael Thiede – and it has been my pleasure to work with both of them as well. They kept the unit going in times when funding was never easy and staff turn over higher than was ideal. These problems continue and it is clear to me that something needs to be done to protect this African, this South African and this UCT jewel in the crown. The senior staff Sue, Di and Lucy are enormously hardworking and dedicated but the burden of rapid staff turnover and

constant search for soft money must – and does - take its toll. That needs to be addressed so that as we celebrate this 20th birthday we can be assured that a 30th and a 40th birthday will follow.

Equity has been a major theme all through. Equity of access, equity of resource allocation across the provinces, equity in HIV/AIDS treatment, equity in health care financing, equity through pharmaceutical pricing, equity, equity, equity ... an ever present driving force among the HEU-ites.

Why such success in gaining the ear of government and the bureaucracy? Success here breeds success as it builds on a reputation of providing frank and fearless research and advice. Good quality, solid, evidence-based research and advice. HEU have kept open the channels to government even when despair might have set in regarding some of the policies of government. Gaining the trust and maintaining the trust of government matter. And perhaps most fundamentally there is a recognition on the part of government that even when the unit is disagreeing with government policy, the unit has at heart 'good intent' in pursuing their interests in a more socially just South Africa.

The theme of social justice shines through in two of the unit's biggest research programs in recent years – SHIELD Strategies for Health Insurance for Equity in Less Developed Countries and REACH Researching Equity in Access to Health Care which have been fostered through another equity project – CREHS the Consortium for Research on Equitable Health Systems.

Teaching is big in HEU! One has to wonder where health economics in Africa would be but for all the teaching and training by HEU. In particular the establishment of HEPNet – the Health Economics and Policy Network in 2000 – has supported so many individuals and institutions in Africa in developing capacity in health economics and policy analysis. And in South Africa where health service management is so crucial at this time, the work of Lucy Gilson is outstanding on the Oliver Tambo Fellowship Programme.

The first time I visited the unit was in 1997. I offered to teach and was asked to teach a course in health economics. I did so - solidly from 8.30 to 3.30 every day for over a week! I taught equity! I note that two of the students on that course – Charlotte and Eyob – figure in the write up on training on 'Masters Graduates: where are they now?' Please do take time to look at all the materials that have been set out here from HEU.

But in that week's teaching, I was exhausted at the end of it. I then visited in just a very short space of time one of the townships and the Waterfront. What a comparison! and I then had a better idea why there was such commitment in HEU to change and for social justice. I did a public lecture at the end of that visit – again on equity. I remember I spoke about the need in South Africa for not necessarily good Samaritans but minimally decent Samaritans. And I argued that to build a better more socially just South Africa, the health care system was a good place to start.

I still believe that today. More importantly – much more importantly - the work of the HEU is daily increasing the prospects for that more socially just society.

Please be upstanding and raise your glasses: To HEU!