

## **PRESS RELEASE 13 August 2009**

### **Launch of the Rural Health Advocacy Project**

On 13th Aug 2009 the Rural Health Advocacy Project was launched at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, coinciding with the launch of the Wits Centre for Rural Health. A renewed focus on access to health care in rural areas is vital in a context of worsening key health indicators in South Africa, a 34% national vacancy rate for doctors, and inequitable access to quality health care.

In South Africa, as in many other countries worldwide, rural communities have poorer health status, less access to health care facilities, fewer resources, less information and an inequitable distribution of health care professionals.

The Advocacy Project, brought alive by the Wits Centre for Rural Health in partnership with the Rural Doctors Association of Southern Africa (RuDASA) and the AIDS Law Project (ALP) aims to tackle these inequities by achieving measurable improvements in rural health services through:

- **Contributing towards policy development including human resources policies for rural health at provincial, national and international levels**
- **Advocating for improvements in rural health care in cooperation with rural communities and stakeholders such as government, academic institutions and the private sector**
- **Highlighting challenges and achievements in rural health care**

The above processes, including the development of an advocacy framework, will be driven by the recently appointed Project Director, Ms. Marije Versteeg. Versteeg previously worked for 3½ years as health researcher in rural communities in the North West Province and another 3½ years with local government on issues relating to HIV/AIDS and development.

The project, which aims to work with all who support improvements in rural health, comes at a critical time. Despite significant achievements in health reform since the dismantling of the apartheid system in 1994, life expectancy is falling, while maternal mortality is rising. South Africa has the highest TB incidence in the world, more than one in six adults is HIV infected, and there is a growing incidence of non-communicable diseases. The health crisis hits rural areas hardest.

Whereas a range of interventions are required to improve health outcomes, equitable healthcare delivery in rural areas should be among the highest priorities. This would demand improved quality and accessibility to services through sufficient funding and human resources as well as an urgent strengthening of the strained health system.

The Rural Health Advocacy Project will systematically seek to inspire others towards such improvements in rural health in order to ultimately achieve the progressive realization of the constitutional right of health for all, including the rural poor.

**For further comment and information contact Marije Versteeg, Project Director, Rural Health Advocacy Project at cell 074 106 3800; fax 011 7172558; email: [ruralhealthadvocacy@gmail.com](mailto:ruralhealthadvocacy@gmail.com); or visit <http://web.wits.ac.za/Academic/Health/Entities/RuralHealth/>, [www.rudasa.org.za](http://www.rudasa.org.za) or [www.alp.org.za](http://www.alp.org.za)**