

Girls' Talk focuses on female health

In 2015, Paarl Rotary was approached by a German gynaecologist, Dr Burga Schwoerer, who had been unable to obtain a work visa while living in South Africa. She had been part of a German NGO (AGGF) which employs about 80 female doctors, covering almost the whole of Germany, to help with sex education at schools. She had started a similar project in the Paarl area, and needed help in financing the project.



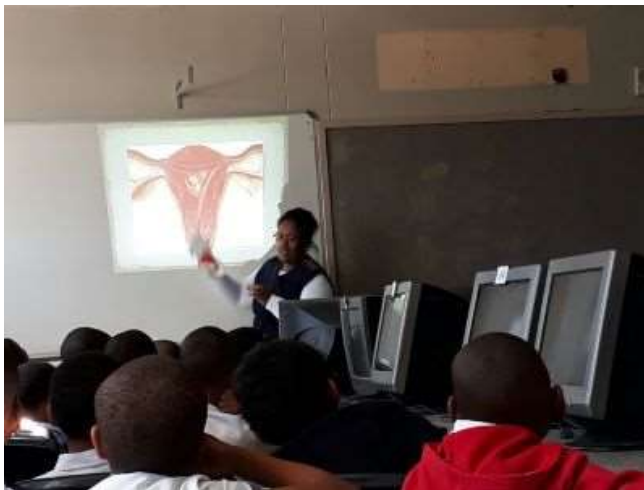
As a result, Paarl Rotary successfully applied for a global grant in association with two German clubs, Bayreuth and Ernst Abbe (in Jena) in 2016. Dr Schwoerer visited more than 40 local schools on a regular basis, addressing girls in higher primary classes and in junior classes at high schools on female health, with the aim of reducing teenage pregnancy and the effects of sexual activity amongst teenagers, such as HIV. Her course covered female anatomy, pregnancy, contraception and sexually transmitted diseases. She also provided Subz pads (reusable female hygiene products) to needy girls.

She used an enlarged mock-up of the uterus and ovaries, made of textile, much to the fascination of the girls. Using a doll to illustrate birthing and child-rearing was also part of her programme.

When Dr Schwoerer returned to Germany in 2017, a local general practitioner, Dr Nelmarie Pitout (pic below), was appointed to replace her. Her talks were in high demand at local schools.



So popular were the talks that eventually an assistant, Sister Esmarelda Patton (in pic below), was appointed to give similar talks to the boys at the same schools, by popular demand. They taught more than 7300 learners during 2017 and reached a similar number during 2018.



Says Dr Pitout: “We have a passion to change young peoples’ lives through candid and uncomplicated presentations. We believe that thorough understanding of this topic can help them make wise decisions that not only impact their own lives greatly, but will also change the future of their children and ultimately this community for many generations to come.”

One in seven children in South Africa is born to a teenage mother. Teenage pregnancy makes up 4% of all live birth in the Western Cape. The Western Cape has the highest percentage of termination of pregnancies (abortions) in the country at 20%.

“In the past two years we have managed to build great relationships with the principals and teachers of the schools we visit. They are very receptive to our program and welcome us back with enthusiasm. They have many a time expressed their appreciation for the help in teaching this sensitive and potentially life changing topic.

“Although sexual education is part of the curriculum of the subject Life Orientation in schools, teachers often feel uneasy and ill-equipped to handle this topic. We have also been contacted by numerous schools outside of our area as well as other NPCs and youth groups with requests to present our material to the learners. Presenting sexual education often leads to difficult and intimate questions from learners that can be very hard to answer if one is not a health professional.

“We love working with the teenagers. During our time with them we have become aware of shocking myths and misperceptions which we can address and dispel. That is why we plan to continue to educate them, thereby empowering them to choose a bright future for themselves and their children.”

During the past two years the service was expanded to serve the farming community as well. Dr Pitout, with her assistant, did separate presentations to groups of teenage girls, teenage boys, adult women and adult men on farms (see pic below).



After the three-year global grant had run its course in 2018, Dr Pitout decided to continue with the project as it might prove to be sustainable. There had been a marked decline in pregnancy rates in the classes she had visited (in fact there had been no pregnancies in these classes since). The project has been renamed the Royalty Project and is still operating at local schools.



Rotarian Elsabé Koch (left), coordinator, with Sister Esmarelda Patton, and Dr Nelmarie Pitout (right).

