

Balm of care for burn victims

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Durban - More than 161 children in South Africa are badly burnt in their homes every month.

At least six of them die as a result of their horrific injuries.

As disheartening as these statistics were for Durban burns treatment expert Dr Nikki Allorto, they failed to address key deficits in care and support for survivors.

That spark ignited into a burning flame and the Burn Care Trust, based in Howick, was born.

Between busy rounds and scrubbing for theatre at a Pietermaritzburg hospital where she is employed, Dr Allorto took time out to speak about the Burn Care Trust, its work and its plan to help the province's youngest burn victims.

It was in 2006 while doing her community service that Dr Allorto took an interest in the plight of burn victims.

Not wanting to mention the name of the hospital, she said that when she started, she was haunted by "the kids screaming in pain".

She added that most incidents took place in winter, because people, especially those living in informal dwellings, used fire to keep warm and to heat water.

"I noticed the children had no one to look after their particular needs. They were often neglected and those charged with taking care of them, as with all of us, had no specialist training," she said.

Allorto explained: "There's no specific diploma or qualification in burns care, so it was difficult to make sure they were as comfortable as possible."

She said there was more to their treatment than medicine; they also needed psychological and social assistance.

"Aside from being in lots of pain, they spend some of the longest times in hospital."

She said this prompted her to pursue a master's degree in burns care in addition to her medical qualification as a general surgeon.

She was also awarded the prestigious Association of Surgeons of SA (ASSA) Sanofi Travelling Fellowship in 2011 and spent time in a top burns unit in Sydney.

"This was when I saw what a far-reaching problem it was, and how many people were affected," she said.

That was when the idea for the institute geared to alleviating suffering and improving management was cemented in her mind.

The trust is working on the whole burn-care system in South Africa, including private and

provincial hospitals.

“We are focusing on the Pietermaritzburg area at the moment. We will be acquiring a fixed premises soon,” she said.

“It has to be a team effort: we need to focus on the training and development of nurses and doctors. We need a team of occupational therapists helping with training and support for the victims, as well as medical personnel.”

Burn wards nationally would also have to be upgraded, to manage infection control.

She added: “You reach a point of ‘compassion fatigue’, where you are straining yourself emotionally.

“People doing the caring also need to be cared for.”

Allorto said that too often medical staff shut off their emotions in an effort to cope.

Aside from these issues, the trust, she said, was focusing on the creation of a “skin bank” which would work much like an organ bank.

“Your skin is an organ, much like your kidneys or lungs. When you die, it can be used to save the lives of burn victims. It can mean the difference between life and death.”

She said various stakeholders had been approached and talks to get the ball rolling had begun.

There were already facilities for tissue banking in Johannesburg, where bone and corneas were already stored for transplant.

“Organ donation can save or help up to 46 people. When you don’t need your body any more, it can be used to save the lives of others.”

The skin protects the body and prevents harmful bacteria from entering it. This organ, the largest in the body, also plays a role in the the manufacture of key nutrients like vitamin D.

She explained: “If a person sustained burns to 40 percent of their body, their chance of survival is minimal without having access to donor skin.

“Donor skin would be cryogenically frozen and can be stored for up to five years.”

The non-profit organisation is also working on a database of burn victims.

“We do not have accurate national statistics on burns and we are working on a system that can be integrated into all hospitals. This database will provide the statistics needed to better understand the broader context of burns and provide treatment plans.”

Yvonne Cordner, with a background in the beauty industry and current president of the Nguni chapter of Business Network International and Ross Williams, who owns and manages a manufacturing group that supplies services to the mining industry, are trustees of the organisation.

Cordner also serves as the organisation’s chief executive.

Allorto said they were still in the process of developing a brand in order to attract funding and donations.

People interested in learning more about the organisation, volunteering their time and assistance to the trust; and donating can log on to their webpage www.burncare.co.za for more information.

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