



Specialist's burning desire to help doctors and victims

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BY SARAH KINGON

"ONE hundred-and-sixty-one children are severely burnt every month in South Africa due to accidents in the home. Six of these children die due to an inadequate burn care system," says specialist surgeon Dr Nikki Allorto.

Allorto, from Edendale Hospital in Pietermaritzburg, said this during a lecture to medical practitioners in East London last Tuesday. The lecture was one of many by her, delivered in cities across South Africa, addressing management of major burns in children in resource poor situations.

The lecture at the East London Health Resource Centre was attended by about 100 people including state and private sector junior and senior professionals tasked with the daily management of patients with burn injuries.

The topic was especially relevant in preparation for winter, when the occurrence of blazes in homes especially shacks rise due to the use of unsafe equipment and fires to keep warm.

Already highly qualified as a specialist general surgeon Allorto has been developing her career in the field of burns since 2006 focusing on costing of burns in a resource sparse setting.

She was awarded the Association of Surgeons of South Africa Sanofi Travelling Fellowship in 2011 and spent time in a top burns unit in Sydney, Australia. She is the president of the South African Burns Society and Founder of the Burn Care Trust and her aim in these twin capacities is to ascertain the challenges and deficits in the country's different cities in terms of treating burns. "We want to change burn care in this country, so networking and burn care education is a large part of that."

Allorto, who originally intended to become a plastic surgeon to "make people look beautiful", had a change of heart when the reality of burns hit her.

"I am a sucker for the underdog. I started my surgical training in a ward with three beds in the corner of the hospital. I remember seeing kids screaming in pain from dressing changes. I felt helpless in the face of all the pain and suffering. I knew I needed to do something to change the lack of knowledge on burns."

Allorto often interjected her Tuesday lecture with practical examples of stressful situations for medical practitioners.

"You have a big knife cutting off layers of burnt skin in a hot theatre with lots of bleeding and you have no specialised training for this type of surgery because it's not available in South Africa."

Associate professor and Head of Paediatric Surgery at the East London Hospital Complex, Milind Chitnis, said: "Burns, even though a common injury and health problem, always tend to be neglected compared to other problems.

"Looking after patients with burns is hard work and not always rewarding. Our aim is to change the apathy and relative ignorance by providing motivation, training and support.

"We were all highly impressed by Dr Allorto's passion, commitment and ability to achieve good quality care despite poor resources. Our situation is very similar to where she works in Pietermaritzburg. Her visit and lecture has given us motivation to work together and harder to give the best quality and care to these unfortunate patients."

Allorto finished her lecture by giving out her contact details, saying that she is always willing to help. She also shared stories and images of her own patients and their amazing recoveries, which has brought her much joy and inspiration to continue. She said one of the problems in South African hospitals is neglect of burn patients because staff are inadequately trained in the treatment of these injuries. Inadequate equipment and an unsuitable environment for suitable care are two other problems. Go to the Burn Care Trust's website at www.burncare.co.za to find out more about what they do and how to get involved.