

## Volunteer Helps Eastern Cape Hospital Increase ART Access through “Down Referral System”

Caroline van der Werff is a young Dutch physician with a passion for rural medicine. She has spent the last 22 months volunteering at Canzibe Hospital in South Africa’s former Transkei region thanks to funding from PEPFAR through CDC/South Africa and support of the HIV/AIDS Twinning Center’s Volunteer Healthcare Corps (VHC).

Located in Eastern Cape Province, near Nelson Mandela’s home village, Canzibe primarily serves the Xhosa people who settled in the area. A missionary hospital until 1976 when it was taken over by the state, Canzibe is a 140-bed rural hospital serving a local population of approximately 70,000. Ten clinics situated in remote parts of the district refer their patients to the hospital for care beyond the scope of the rural health posts.

Canzibe faces all the usual challenges of recruiting and retaining healthcare professionals at a rural hospital, but they were also burdened with a bigger obstacle — the hospital did not have access to antiretrovirals. With the help of Transcape, a local non-profit, the hospital has devised a solution to treating people living with HIV/AIDS by establishing a make-shift, yet fully functioning ARV unit, effectively bypassing government bureaucracy and providing access to treatment to 10,000 people in need.



Dutch physician and VHC volunteer Caroline van der Werff (center) talks with an ART patient who has been able to access treatment and care at her local clinic thanks to the new down referral system van der Werff implemented at Canzibe Hospital in rural Eastern Cape Province.

Since van der Werff started her VHC assignment in December 2007, she has instituted a down referral system that enjoys a 100 percent success rate. The system features a strong patient education component, so individuals know to go to the clinic closest to their home for ART rather than spending their limited time, energy, and resources traveling on dirt roads just to get to the hospital each month.

Additionally, van der Werff has spent a significant amount of time training nurses in the surrounding clinics and is also conducting community training of home-based caregivers through Transcape.

According to van der Werff, 800 patients were on ART as of July 2009. Her goal is to get 15 new patients on treatment each week, and she is currently working to establish community support groups for PLWH. For those who are receiving care, it is clear that the volunteer's efforts are paying off.

"I no longer have to travel long distances to the hospital and wait in long lines to get my medication. Instead, I can save money to buy food," says ART patient Ntombixolo Majola\*. "At my local clinic, I am attended to immediately. I used to be wary about going to there for treatment because the neighbors might ask questions, but now I am just grateful for Dr. Caroline," Majola explains.

*\* Name changed at the request of the patient.*

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