

Annual district research conferences organised in the Gauteng Province

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The five districts in the Gauteng Province have a long history of organising annual research conferences. This tradition was initiated in the Gauteng Province at the Provincial level through hosting the Annual Prakash Vallabh Primary Health Care Research Conference initiated in 1997 and held annually until disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The tradition resumed after 2022. In 2023, the three metro districts in the Gauteng Province—Ekurhuleni, Johannesburg and Tshwane—organised district research conferences. This report focussed on those three events.

Keywords. District research conference, Ekurhuleni, Gauteng, Johannesburg, primary healthcare, Tshwane.

Ekurhuleni District Research Conference

On 23 November 2023, the Ekurhuleni District held their 23rd annual conference themed 'Closing the Gap between Research and Practice: Role of Management'. The presentation at the conference provided a comprehensive exploration of crucial healthcare domains, including non-communicable diseases (NCDs), HIV/AIDS, management strategies, research dissemination and broader societal issues, such as gender-based violence and physical activity. The event was a platform for academic discourse and knowledge exchange to promote evidence-based practice in healthcare. The sessions were conducted by leading experts in their respective fields, who shared their insights and research findings, fostering a culture of critical thinking and innovation. In addition, the conference featured discussions and presentations concerning the National Health Insurance (NHI), given the pressing need for healthcare reform in South Africa (SA). Various stakeholders contributed insights and perspectives on crucial aspects of the impending healthcare transition.

Oral presentations at the conference covered several thematic areas, including healthcare worker practices (like understanding knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding oral HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis among healthcare workers and SARS-CoV-2 seroprevalence to inform future public health strategies), chronic disease management (e.g., evaluating an integrated non-communicable and chronic disease clinical stationery and screening tool during the pilot phase) and healthcare infrastructure (e.g., an audit of theatre operating efficiency at a central hospital).

A showcase of research posters gave attendees a visual understanding of ongoing projects to improve healthcare quality.

Projects ranged from financial sensitivity enhancements in central hospitals to interventions for optimising patient care, such as reducing emergency department stay durations and improving stroke patient treatment efficacy.

The inclusive approach at this conference fostered comprehensive discussions and the exchange of different ideas. Stakeholders engaged in identifying barriers and perceptions surrounding healthcare challenges, paving the way for collaborative solutions. Beyond disseminating findings, the conference was valuable for skill development and knowledge exchange. Attendees had the opportunity to enhance their research techniques, contributing to the continuous improvement of the healthcare system in anticipation of the NHI implementation.

Tshwane District Research Conference

The Tshwane District Health Services Research Conference took place on the 28th and 29th of September 2023. It aimed to promote sustainable development and re-think health systems strengthening in the Tshwane District. The conference featured multiple sessions covering various topics related to health including communicable diseases. This session addressed research related to communicable diseases. Topics covered during the session include sexual behaviours and practices of young adults, unsuppressed viral loads in children and adolescents living with HIV, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on maternal and child health services, characterisation of methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* and molecular characterisation of flaviviruses detected in mosquitoes. Several sessions focused on issues relevant to district systems including health systems, like an interactive panel discussion on

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Community-Oriented Primary Care (COPC) as an implementation tool for the Township, Informal Settlements and Hostel (TISH) project and Maternal, Child, Women's Health & Nutrition, and Communicable Diseases. Researchers were given a platform to display their posters, showcasing their hard work and innovative projects. The posters focused on the theme 're-thinking health systems strengthening and promoting sustainable development', covering a wide array of topics, including topics related to mental health and molecular medicine.

Perspectives and collaboration

Re-thinking health systems and strengthening and promoting sustainable development requires the engagement of multiple critical stakeholders at the conference. The conference provided a platform for healthcare workers and district representatives to discuss research topics and engage in meaningful dialogue about the state of health services in the district. It also highlighted crucial plans and strategies to improve health services in Tshwane. The conference was successful, achieving its objectives through the collaborative efforts of the Tshwane District Health Services team, the University of Pretoria and generous sponsors.

Johannesburg Health District Research Conference

The theme of the conference was preparing for NHI. A team of esteemed researchers delved into various pertinent health-related

topics, presenting their findings through engaging presentations and informative poster sessions. Among the issues explored were the critical aspects of Primary Health Care and its role in achieving Universal Health Coverage. The presentations were particularly noteworthy for their insightful discussions on the challenges faced by both healthcare providers and users in accessing HIV testing services, as well as novel strategies for combating HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Additionally, the team delved deeply into topics, such as gender-based violence, mental health, vaccine hesitancy and maternal and child health, providing valuable insights and thought-provoking discussion points.

Conclusion

The research conferences provided ideal opportunities for meaningful conversation and stakeholder involvement, highlighting the exceptional and innovative research conducted in various health districts. These events marked essential milestones in advancing healthcare quality for residents of Gauteng. By bridging the gap between research and practice, and emphasising NHI preparation, PHC reorienting and sustainable health systems development, the conferences fostered a shared commitment to creating a more robust and equitable healthcare system. Through collaboration and innovation, the goal of universal healthcare access draws nearer to becoming a reality.