

COVID was 'heartbreaking,' says South Africa's youngest doctor

January 27 2022



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South Africa's youngest female doctor says life on the frontlines of the pandemic changed her perspective on life.

While most people her age are out partying with friends, Thakgalo Thibela is grinding away at one of Johannesburg's busiest hospitals. After achieving her dream of becoming a doctor at 21, Thibela became the youngest female practicing [medical doctor](#) in South Africa.

Thibela, from Mpumalanga Province, completed high school at just 15 and six years later she graduated from the University of the Witwatersrand [medical school](#).

Thibela, now 22, tells SciDev.Net that working long hours under trying conditions at Johannesburg's Helen Joseph Hospital has taught her to appreciate life.

What's a typical day like for you at Helen Joseph Hospital?

Last year I was doing obstetrics [pregnancy and childbirth]. When I was on call, I would see anywhere from 40 to 60 patients. This is from 7am to 7am the next day. You have to be responsible for all of these patients, you have to see them at least every four hours or every two hours, depending on what condition they have. It would be draining because in between seeing these patients, you still need to go to theater. You try your best to see everyone but you just can't split yourself.

But when you have time to actually talk to them, you sit down and have a proper conversation, it makes you feel like, "OK, I've done everything I can for my patient." In obstetrics, the longest call I've ever had was when I started at 7am and I only left the next day at about 1.30pm.

Let's talk a bit about that first moment that COVID-19 hit. Can you take me back to that time and what it was like?

When COVID-19 hit in 2020 I was in my final year of medical school. It really changed the way we had to be taught medicine because it was before the vaccine era. Everyone was relying on masks and sanitizing, and there were things that we were not allowed to do because of COVID-19.

But then the third wave hit when I was in internal medicine. This is the most hectic of rotations because you see everyone from TB to pneumonia to renal failure and [heart failure](#). And I remember this one call in casualty. We usually had six rooms with oxygen ports, but that day we had about three to four patients trying to share this one oxygen port. The hospital was full. You could see the frustration for the patients and the family members. Knowing that there's nothing you can do to help, was the worst for me. It was the most heart-breaking situation to work through.

Are there any ways that becoming a doctor at 21 has significantly changed who you are?

It has made me a lot more responsible. I always joke about this with my friends—if they forget to do something, no life is lost, but if I make a mistake then the patient's life is lost. So, it has made me realize nothing is too small. Nothing can really be left for later. I need to treat that person who is in front of me as if they were my mother or my father, or someone I really cared about. And if they were my mother, would I really wait to order that test tomorrow or should I order it now? I feel like it has really grown my compassionate side and my empathetic side. I have a greater appreciation of life.

As a young black woman trying to get into a science field, how did you manage to overcome some of the hurdles that were surely put in your way?

From a young age, I've always been an academic. I've always wanted to do my best. My mum reminds me that when I was in grade one or two, we had an exam, and I got 95 or 90 out of 100, and I cried the whole day because I missed the marks. I've always wanted to be the best. And because my [[high school](#)] teachers knew this, they were always expecting me to be the best. It really took a toll on me and I almost broke down. I was doing eight subjects and I've got seven distinctions. And that's how I got into medical [school](#) [at the University of the Witwatersrand]. But, quite a few schools rejected me. I remember it was a Friday before registration was happening, I got a call in the afternoon at like 4pm [saying]: "Please come on Monday to register." It was so surreal to me.

Provided by SciDev.Net

Citation: COVID was 'heartbreaking,' says South Africa's youngest doctor (2022, January 27)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-01-covid-heartbreaking-south-africa-youngest.html>

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