

A momentous year indeed

For South Africans it has been a momentous year so far. After hectic preparations, the joyful noise of the vuvuzelas loudly proclaimed the achievements of the 'African' football World Cup, and the mood was one of national euphoria. We were in the limelight again. We had done what sceptics had doubted we could do. There was the hope and perhaps even a promise of a better life for all.

In early August there was more reason to celebrate. Thousands of paediatricians from all over the world assembled in Johannesburg to participate in the first-ever world congress of paediatrics to be held in Africa south of the Sahara. Important topics relevant to our children's lives and health were discussed. It seemed that child health issues in Africa had achieved their rightful importance.

The footballers and the paediatricians have departed. Once again we have to face the reality that for the children of our country and on our continent, health care delivery and outcomes fall far short of the promises and the targets. We in South Africa have not achieved the gains and improvements in health care indicators of many other less developed countries. Measured against our developmental status, provision and delivery of quality health care to mothers and children remain woefully inadequate. Appalling reports on the state of health care provision to mothers, babies and children in this country, worsened by recent health worker strikes, just serve to confirm that as a nation we cannot lay claim to being a caring society. After all, caring for the most vulnerable members of society, mothers and children, remains a political, professional and human imperative.

And yet, potentially the biggest reason for encouragement and hope for real progress in the field of South African child health dates from even before the beginning of this year. The government's announcement of new policy guidelines in the field of maternal HIV infection and prevention of mother-to-child transmission gave cause for real hope that we would finally be able to make progress towards achieving one of the millennium development goals, that of reducing child mortality.

The new guidelines are therefore really Hot Topics. This issue of the *Journal* features two invited commentaries. Ramdhial and Coovadia provide the background and rationale for training of all categories of health workers to enable them to help HIV-infected mothers obtain the best possible advice in the management of their pregnancies and newborn babies. Mother-to-infant transmission of HIV has always meant the mother's virus entering the baby, and not a feeding method! With the care package that is now available for pregnant HIV-infected women, we should be able to control the virus in the pregnant woman; let us care for the mother and let breastmilk

care for the baby! That is the essential message of Goga and Jackson's contribution.

This month the *Journal* again carries a variety of interesting contributions from all over Africa. Mwachaka and Mbugua's paper highlights factors influencing intended career choices among medical students in Kenya. Students choosing paediatrics seemed to rate role modelling by teachers and practitioners higher than expected financial rewards or status. Thandrayen and Saloojee's survey of primary care settings in Johannesburg reveals a poor quality of primary health care being offered to children in the richest city of Africa. Even here, the modern buzz-word of 'service delivery' is dependent on people actually doing the right thing. Shay, Haidar and Kogi-Makau's contribution draws attention to female circumcision in Ethiopia and shows up the importance of educational circumstances and unemployment rather than religion in perpetuating this tradition. Finally, Kruger and Naman show that cranial ultrasound can be used successfully in neonates in resource-poor settings.

Child health care is about people and commitment. We know what should be done and what we should like to achieve. One lesson we should learn from the success of the World Cup is that after the planning, the targets and the rhetoric, real progress finally comes about by real people getting down to work towards a common goal.



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Warm South African congratulations to Keith Bolton, Peter Cooper and the SAPA team for making the first IPA congress in Africa south of the Sahara such a big success.