

## NEWS FROM:

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**20 April 2010**

**HEU celebrates 20 years of research, teaching and policy contributions  
Tuesday, 20 April 2010, 17h30, Centre for the Book, 62 Queen Victoria Street,  
Cape Town**

The University of Cape Town's Health Economics Unit (HEU) – widely recognised as the leading health economics institution in Africa and one of the most respected such units among low- and middle-income countries – is celebrating its 20th anniversary on Tuesday, 20 April 2010, at 17h30 at the Centre for the Book in Cape Town.

The Vice-Chancellor of UCT, Dr Max Price, said: "Social responsibility is something UCT aims to instil in our students, academics and researchers alike. The HEU was founded on a commitment to social justice in health care in South Africa, and has carried this commitment into areas like HIV/AIDS and how to finance health for all. It advises policy makers as well as health professionals, and in this way it has affected millions of lives over the last 20 years. I am proud to congratulate the HEU on its many notable milestones."

The head of the HEU, Dr Sue Cleary, said: "The health economists' slogan is: 'Health economics saves lives!' While many think health economics is only concerned with costs, it is really about finding ways to save more lives and improve health through the better use of the health care budget. The longevity of the HEU presents a unique opportunity to demonstrate the importance of health economics to health systems."

She added that key questions include: How best should money be spent on HIV/AIDS? What is the best design for NHI? "While the ethos of medicine is about doing good, that of health economics is about doing better – with the scarce resources available," she said. "Finding answers to these questions requires solid research, which is what the HEU aims to provide. For a university-based research unit, the HEU is very special in the close links it has to the policy process, while remaining separate and independent from the bureaucracy."

### **Roots of HEU are in the struggle**

When the HEU was initiated in 1990, it used its research powers to advocate against apartheid in health care. As a result, today the ANC government is open to the messages emerging from the HEU's research. There is a far-reaching sense of trust in the HEU's professionalism and integrity.

The HEU's early emphasis on equity in health and health care has continued. Its research findings on topics such as user fees, equitable resource allocation across provinces and HIV/AIDS have been used to influence and sometimes even form the basis of government policy. Key research by HEU is now playing an important part in the current debate on the NHI.

HEU Professor Di McIntyre, one of the founders of the HEU, said: "Without a shadow of a doubt, the HEU has contributed extensively to the development of health economics in South Africa and in Africa more generally."

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the HEU's teaching. Through a multiplicity of courses the unit has trained health economists not only in South Africa but across 20 countries in Africa. These HEU graduates are today influencing their own governments to try to ensure that resources for health are used to provide the greatest possible health benefits, especially to the poor. HEU training also extends to many health professionals in the South African health service. They need to know how to deliver health care efficiently and equitably – and more and more of them are being trained in these skills through HEU courses.

Health economists face many challenges over the next 20 years, but the HEU is looking forward to providing more research into key health policy issues and imparting the skills needed by budding economists who are keen to help make a difference.

### **Top researchers set high standards for research and policy development**

Key in the foundation and development of the HEU's work has been Dr Cleary, Professor McIntyre and Professor Gavin Mooney.

**Dr Sue Cleary** has been the Director of the HEU since 2007. She has been a member of the unit since 2001, entering as a junior researcher before doing her PhD on the economics of HIV/AIDS and has since risen rapidly in the HEU. She says: "When the HEU was started in 1990, there were almost no health economists on the African continent, whereas now there are over 150 graduates from four different teaching programmes. In Africa alone we have alumni from around 20 different countries. To me this has been one of our highest achievements and it has been my privilege to be involved. And in South Africa itself, we can see that as a unit our research is making a difference to the quality of people's lives and especially the health of the poor."

**Professor Di McIntyre**, the founding Director of the HEU, has been its guide, mentor, backbone and very often the face of the HEU throughout its 20 years. Di did

her PhD on equity in health care in the apartheid years and is no stranger, professionally or personally, to the struggles for social justice in this country. Di has been an important participant in the key debates on financing and delivering health care in South Africa in the last two decades. She says: "Health policy must be evidence-based, and the rigorous use of our economic skills, combined with our understanding of policy processes, is effective in influencing policy makers. I have a deep commitment to use economic analysis to bring greater equity to health services in this county of ours. Let's face it – the poor currently get a lousy deal from health care. That needs to change." On her work on NHI, she adds: "Achieving a universal health system will allow us to better meet the health needs of all South Africans, and will bring better health to the poor. It can also be such an important pillar in building a more just society."

**Professor Gavin Mooney** holds an honorary position in the HEU and is a regular visitor to the unit. Originally from Scotland and now based in Australia, last year Gavin was awarded an honorary doctorate by UCT as "one of the founding fathers of health economics". He says: "It is for me such a buzz to work with Sue and Di and the others in the HEU. I have worked in various research units in a number of countries, but the drive and commitment of this group is in my view unsurpassed. The HEU's commitment to furthering social justice makes this my intellectual home."

#### **What is health economics?**

Health Economics is the application of the thinking and the tools of economics to health and health care. It starts from the fact that society's and the health service's resources are scarce. It then asks "how can we best deploy these scarce resources to save as many lives as we can and reduce suffering and disease as much as possible?" It also asks "what is fair?" It argues for a more just society and more equitable health care so that the reduction in the enormous burden of disease that the poor in this country bear is given priority. While accepting that the ethos of medicine is about doing good, that of Health Economics is about doing better - with the scarce resources available.