

CLINICAL ASSOCIATES IN SOUTH AFRICA – A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PROFESSION

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Mr Scott Smalley is the Academic Head of Division of Clinical Associates in the Department of Family Medicine and Primary Care, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. He graduated from the University of Vermont in 1991 with a BSc and Northeastern University Bouve College of Health Sciences in 2007 with a Masters in Science in Physician Assistant Studies in the United States. Mr Smalley has provided medical care and training as a Physician Assistant in the US, as a Clinical Officer in Kenya and as a Clinical Associate in South Africa. As Head of the Division of Clinical Associates, Mr Smalley coordinates the undergraduate and postgraduate Bachelor of Clinical Medical Practice (BCMP) degrees to train students to be registered as Clinical Associates. He recently completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Health Science Education at University of Witwatersrand and is Chair of the Faculty of Health Sciences Logistics and Operations Team overseeing the implementation of COVID-19 Regulations for student teaching and learning. He is on the Clinical Associate National Department of Health Task Team. He serves as President for the International Academy of Physician Associate Educators (IAPAE).

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Lumbani Tshotetsi is a Faculty member of the Department of Family Medicine at University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa. She is a Lecturer and Coordinator for the Year 1 course in the Bachelor of Clinical Medical Practice degree. She serves on the executive board for the University of Pretoria BCMP programme where she lectures clinical associate students. She serves as the secretary for the International Academy for Physician Associate Educators and has participated on both local and international interprofessional and problem based learning. She is a research coordinator for an international research project in TB under the Department of Microbiology and

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General Information:

Clinical Associates are a value-add health professional within the South African healthcare system, joining the ranks in 2011. The clinical associate (ClinA) is a burgeoning healthcare professional modelled after the physician assistant in the United States and the clinical officer in much of East Africa.¹ In 2005, the South African Family Medicine Education Consortium along with the National Department of Health developed a three-year bachelor degree curriculum to train high school graduating students as clinical associates.¹

Entry Criteria:

Minimum requirements for entry into a BCMP degree include completion of a secondary school certificate or high school diploma with passing marks in basic sciences, maths and English as well as above average achievement in the National Benchmark Test, a standardised university entry test in South Africa.

Education:

Three universities in South Africa provide the Bachelor of Clinical Medical Practice (BCMP) degree including Water Sisulu University, started in 2008, University of Pretoria and University of Witwatersrand, both started in 2009.² Each programme has 40 to 70 students per year of study with a combined yearly graduate number of 180 students.

The BCMP curriculum and teaching pedagogy is designed after the 21st century health science education model with an integrated curriculum, work based practice and assessments with technology enhanced teaching and learning. ClinA students have more than 50% of their training in the practice setting, starting in first year.³ Problem based learning, case based learning and core concepts with application of health science knowledge, skills and attitude form the integrated

curriculum. Intentional emphasis is placed on inter-professional learning and practice. Students acquire competence in over 180 clinical procedures through work-based practice, preparing them for medical practice in promotive, preventative and curative healthcare services.³

Financing Education:

In South Africa university fees are programme dependent; funding for all public university students is subsidized by the government, with students required to pay the balance of what is not covered.

Students in South Africa are categorised according to their social economic status which offers them to either qualify for National Student Financial Aid Scheme which is funded by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). Some students pay their own school fees while others; however, very few, have scholarship

Accrediting/Regulatory Bodies:

The universities gain approval for the BCMP curriculum through the South African Qualification Authority and the Council on Higher Education as well as accreditation through the Health Professions Council of South Africa. All universities take guidance from the National Department of Higher Education and Training.

ClinAs are registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA), the professional government regulatory body, with advocacy and support through the Professional Association of Clinical Associates of South Africa (PACASA).⁴

Professional Licensure:

Unique to this health professional training is a national exit exam, the Clinical Associate National Exam (CANE) developed and administered by the Clinical Associate National Exam Committee, consisting of academics from each university, which all final year students sit for at the completion of the study programme and must pass to be considered qualified to register as a clinical associate.⁶ The national exam ensures minimum clinical competencies are met with common core conditions. In addition to the undergraduate programme, the University of the Witwatersrand offers a postgraduate honours degree in Emergency Medicine, started in 2017, which qualifies students to proceed to masters' level of training.² Currently, there are plans to develop honours programmes in Anaesthesia, Surgery and Obstetrics & Gynaecology. The Health profession council of South Africa licenses the profession. There is no searchable database of practicing ClinAs.

Scope of Practice:

In South Africa Clinical Associates are a supervised practitioner, working under the license of a medical doctor with mentorship and collaboration. Upon graduation, ClinAs work under direct supervision for two years, followed by indirect supervision for another two years. After five years of continual employment in a healthcare sector, ClinAs can act independently with collaborative supervision from a designated and identified medical doctor.⁴

ClinAs provide a wide range of medical treatments and work in a variety of healthcare settings. Their scope of practice, as approved by the South African National Department of Health in 2016, states, a clinical associate may perform "any act delegated to him or her by the supervising medical

practitioner in accordance with the education, training and experience of the clinical associate".⁵ This includes conducting patient consultations, history and physical exams, ordering and interpreting tests, investigation and studies, as well as medical and therapeutic procedures with development and implementation of management plans and treatments. Clinical associates, per the scope of practice, can prescribe medications up to Schedule IV.⁵ Currently, CinAs need a co-signature on all prescriptions from their supervising medical practitioners as the South African law does not recognize them as legal prescribers. PACASA and the Private Practice Symposium⁶ are motivating for legal changes with regards to this.

Maintaining Role:

Clinical associates are required to complete continuing medical education (CME) or continuing professional development (CPD) courses to have a minimum of 30 continuing education units (CDU) in general topics and 5 CDU in ethics every twelve months.

Job Opportunities:

Currently, there are more than 1200 ClinAs registered to practice medicine, under supervision, in South Africa. Clinical associates in South Africa work in all sectors of health care including government hospitals and clinics, private practice settings and non-governmental organisations; additionally ClinAs work as full time academics in tertiary institutions and in research units as researchers. ClinAs are spread out across the nine provinces of South Africa providing primary healthcare as well as advanced practice in internal medicine, emergency medicine, paediatrics, women's health and surgery. The COVID-19 pandemic has created new job opportunities, further advancing the clinical associate career path in South Africa, demonstrating the value-add of this health professional.

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Resources and websites:

Clinical Associate Programme, Department of Family Medicine, Walter Sisulu University. Programme Coordinator: Dr MB Khatry-Chhetry, mukundkc2@gmail.com

Clinical Associate Programme, Department of Family Medicine, University of Pretoria. Programme Coordinator: Dr Murray Louw, murray.louw@up.ac.za

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Professional Association of Clinical Associates of South Africa:
<https://www.facebook.com/ClinicalAssociatesRSA/>

Health Professions Council of South Africa:
<https://www.hpcsa.co.za/?contentId=462&actionName=Home>

National Department of Health: <http://www.health.gov.za/>

Department of Higher Education and Training: <https://www.dhet.gov.za/>

Council on Higher Education in South Africa: <https://www.che.ac.za/#/main>

South African Qualifications Authority: <https://www.saqa.org.za/>