**More dieticians needed**

A SHORTAGE of registered dieticians, a high rate of malnutrition and a need to consider the role of traditional medicines are some of the reasons why young people need to be encouraged to study Dietetics.

This is the belief of Dr Annelie Gresse, who heads the new Dietetics Department at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU).

As one of the poorest provinces in South Africa, the Eastern Cape experiences high rates of malnutrition. Yet it has the lowest number of dieticians in the country.

“There are only just over 2000 registered dieticians in South Africa, and very few of those are in the Eastern Cape,” says Dr Gresse.

While there are 7.7 doctors for every 10 000 people in South Africa, there are even fewer dieticians - 0.16 per 10 000 people.

And yet dieticians can play a crucial role in malnutrition alleviation.

“The Eastern Cape is a poverty-stricken province, with high malnutrition and HIV/Aids infection rates. This is why nutrition becomes so important, especially in the rural areas.

“That’s why it is important for us to get students from the rural areas to study dietetics in order for them to go back and help out in their communities,” says Dr Gresse.

According to Dr Gresse, students who study Dietetics can venture into one of the following areas after graduating:

* Therapeutic nutrition
* Community nutrition (includes sport nutrition)
* Food Service Management and
* Research

NMMU has 58 Dietetics students - 22 are currently in first year, 24 in second year, 10 in third year and there are two masters students. The current third-year class will be the first class to graduate in 2017 after completing their fourth year next year.

**Traditional medicine**

Incorporating traditional herbs and medicines into lectures has become critical in a bid to respond to the needs of most South African people.

“80% of South Africans still consult with traditional healers because they are more comfortable with them. We have to have knowledge of traditional herbs because there are very good herbs that actually help.

“As dieticians we have to recognise them and also adapt the foods to fit in with these herbs,” says the industrious lecturer.

She says there are traditional medicines that work well. “It would be foolish for us not to take that into consideration.”

The only way to solve the issue of malnutrition is if we all work together, says Dr. Gresse.

“If we don’t all work together, nothing will happen. Dieticians must also be eager to help, be passionate and compassionate.”

Dietetics students whose lecture halls at the newly-built High Performance Complex at NMMU’s South Campus resemble a kitchen-cum-classroom recognise the importance of their profession in addressing malnutrition.

“It would also be helpful if more people knew about Dietetics - and even studied it - so that they can help out in communities where there is a high prevalence of malnutrition,” says Lynn Gardner, a third-year Dietetics student.

**The elderly**

According to Dr Gresse an increase in the life expectancy of South Africans from 56.5 in 2009 to 58.5 in 2014 means there is also a growing number of elderly people who need the expertise of dieticians. But without the provision of services to meet the ever-increasing demand, the nutrition and wellness of the elderly is likely to be compromised.

“There will only be change when there are enough dieticians.”

Dietetics at NMMU