

Black medical education and struggles against apartheid in South Africa

Vanessa Noble, *A School of Struggle: Durban's Medical School and the Education of Black Doctors in South Africa*

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Aptly entitled *A School of Struggle*, Vanessa Noble's book is a vital contribution to South Africa's burgeoning medical historiography and its niche lies in its focus on the apartheid era's University of Natal Medical School for black candidates. Although a few of South Africa's iconic teaching hospitals such as Groote Schuur (in Cape Town), and Baragwanath Hospital (in Johannesburg), have recently received book length analyses illuminating some of the issues covered in Noble's book, the rich and complex medical history of South Africa would be incomplete without a thorough analysis of the country's main producer of black medics during the apartheid era.

This medical school emerged in the early 1950s and claimed its spot in history as the country's first "blacks only" institution offering medical degree qualifications that were recognised by the country's professional medical bodies. In addition to this distinct characteristic, the school's historical importance goes beyond the stethoscope in that it developed to become the seedbed of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) and other anti apartheid movements with a national resonance. As an apartheid construct, Noble says memorably, this institution "both reflected and resisted apartheid influences in complex ways" (p 2). This line of thought is charted successfully as Noble knits together a story with diverse contrapuntal strands.

Medical schools at the Universities of the Witwatersrand and Cape Town officially offered medical tuition to a token number of black candidates at the time, but as Noble argues, these students endured many racial restrictions that were associated with such white medical schools. In addition, the onset and consolidation of apartheid from the 1950s onwards made it even more difficult for these institutions to admit black students. In detailing the complexities of the founding of Durban's Medical School, Noble gives a great deal of attention to its long pre history and its legion of benefactors such as the obscure African woman from Johannesburg's Alexandra township who donated money towards the school's construction. Zulu traditional leadership was also very supportive in this regard.

Noble offers some measured praise for the innovative curriculum the medical school offered, which incorporated the human and social sciences in addition to providing training in social, preventive and community medicine. Closer ties between the school and the Durban based Institute of Family and Community, spearheaded by progressive doctors Sydney and Emily Kark, made the social medicine option possible. However, this later became a source of friction because the state misinterpreted social medicine to mean "socialised medicine", which was, they alleged, promoted by communist societies. Here Noble also offers another little known aspect of the Karks' history: black students' initial opposition to this apparently "ghettoising" social medicine curriculum which was not offered in other medical schools in the country. However, this cutting edge curriculum atrophied in the 1960s, not because of student opposition, but due to factors related to state disinterest, limited funding and the departure of enthusiasts.

The medical school's staff and leadership are portrayed in the book as activists and strategic in their thinking because they had to deal with a right wing state that was hell bent on thwarting any form of racial fraternisation by creating separate institutional spaces. The staff had to walk a political cum pedagogical tightrope created by apartheid conditions, to produce a notable number of black doctors. By 1994 the institution had produced no less than 2 413 doctors. Some of them, such as Soromini Kallichurum, returned to the medical school to join the academic staff.

However, the author also indicates that very large numbers of students fell by the wayside. Academic support programmes which included a bridging year offered to medical students seemed to be inadequate and were surpassed by what was offered at the Medical University of South Africa (MEDUNSA), another black medical school which opened during the 1970s. In the post apartheid context, academic support has become central to the transformation agendas of many universities in South Africa and Noble reminds us that some models work better

than others. The author also indicates that successful medical training depends on a host of other variables such as the condition of teaching hospitals. The Durban students were exposed to appalling conditions in teaching hospitals such as the King Edward VIII Hospital which in many ways is a stark mirror image of the condition of some hospitals twenty years after the attainment of democracy. In addition, the training and experience of black medical students and interns was compromised by rampant racism. For instance, the book covers the problem of white nurses' insubordination to illustrate the racism and awkward situations experienced by trainee black doctors in teaching hospitals.

Turning to the students who enrolled at Durban's medical school, the author shows that many of them were driven into political activism by frustration with systematic subjugation. This activism gave birth to "a confident and defiant black consciousness" from the 1960s (p 5), paving the way for a broader activism which intersected with national liberation struggles during the 1970s and 1980s. As the seedbed of the Black Consciousness Movement, led by well known activists such as the late Bantu Stephen Biko, Noble also illuminates some interesting links between this movement and African community healthcare development schemes spearheaded by former students such as Mamphela Ramphele.

And yet the book does not merely eulogise this black consciousness and activism, but tells a more complex story that does not shy away from the contradictions and divisions within the student body. The student collective was characterised by tensions along ideological and ethnic lines: black Africans and Indian Africans often had divergent political opinions. Family backgrounds, different visions and gender differences also created fault lines within the student body and there were also some students who were politically apathetic for a variety of reasons. This approach by Noble successfully undermines the unitary and triumphalist narrative of the post apartheid era. However, this is done with a great deal of empathy.

The author also uses a good selection of illustrations to give readers some useful visual insight into the history of the institution. A couple of hilarious cartoons and photographs help colour the story for the readers. For instance, photographs on pages 139 and 140 show the extremely close location of black medical students' recreational facilities and residence to the industrial oil refinery, giving a powerful picture of the responsible authorities' total disregard for the welfare of these students. Unfortunately, the images on the cover page are of poor quality, something which should be blamed on the publishers. However, this book should not be judged by its cover! Indeed, in the appendices section, the book also has five tables that have some useful statistics on enrolment and through put, covering the years from the late 1950s to the early 2000s.

As the author is quick to admit, the book does not claim to cover all aspects of the medical school's complicated history. Nonetheless, in the interests of scholarly engagement one could pick on one or two lines of inquiry that could be enlightening if probed beyond the covers of this book. Noble broaches the notorious issue about the prohibition of black students from accessing white patients and dissecting cadavers as part of their training, which meant, it seems, that apartheid decreed that racial fraternisation was not allowed in life or in death. Ethically, this practice was wrong period. But practically, did this have any impact on a group of medical graduates who were destined to work among their fellow blacks anyway? Asked differently, which diseases were and are still

“whites” only or “blacks” only ailments? Does pathogenesis differ between these races?

Also, although the author did well to show that black doctors helped resolve communication constraints and cultural incomprehension in the delivery of healthcare, the patients’ own views and experiences with black and white doctors could have balanced the narrative. There are also a few perhaps even minor editorial issues that could have been smoothed out. Obviously the chapters were written separately and put together at a later stage. So the author introduces, almost fully, some characters more than once: for instance, Soromini Kallichurum (pp 55 56 and 135) and Alan B. Taylor (pp 63 and 136). There is also lack of consistency in currencies used: the bursary schemes are still quoted in pounds (even since 1961) while the cost of constructing the Alan Taylor residence is given in rands.

However, these minor editorial issues do not detract from the shine of a well written and accessible book. Durban’s medical school and the country’s legion of former medical students; current medical students; medical humanities students; public health department bureaucrats; and the informed public, will find this book very valuable, especially at a time when South Africa is grappling with reforming its public health system to introduce a National Health Insurance scheme. The training and deployment of doctors is still an issue of concern, and Noble’s book could be an important source of insight.

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