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Public Health in a Society in Transition: South Africa

“Public Health in a Society in Transition: South Africa” is a 6-credit course offered by the International Health Option of the Masters of Public Health Program at New York University (NYU). The course is open to any student who has an undergraduate degree with a health background or work experience in a developing country. The course is run jointly by the NYU and the School of Public Health at the University of Cape Town (UCT). This course is of particular relevance to students of public health and development because it illustrates how a broad range of socio-economic and political factors are integral to health.

Background material is provided prior to the course, which is divided into the following weekly modules:

1. Lectures and seminars at UCT and site visits designed to give an overview of the historical factors that have led to the current health situation and health-related policy in South Africa. Students participate in a number of site visits to clinics and health projects in surrounding townships.
2. Students are assigned to observe and/or work in an NGO focused on a problem they are interested in, such as domestic violence, access to medical care or reproductive health.
3. Participants travel to the HIV/AIDS epicenter in rural KwaZulu-Natal. Part of this week is spent with the staff of The Africa Centre, learning about the centre's HIV/AIDS research projects.
4. Participants work in groups on a term project related to their NGO experience. This project is presented to students and the faculty.

The aims of the course are:

1. to highlight the challenges faced in providing health services and securing public health with limited resources.
2. to develop an understanding of the relationship between current public health problems and historical factors.

3. to assess the resource priority of public health compared to the resource priority of education, housing and employment in South Africa.
4. to acquire an understanding of the similarities and differences in improving health status and health service provision in developed and developing countries.
5. to examine the relationship between health, racism, gender inequality and human rights.
6. to examine the impact of HIV/AIDS on the South African economy and community health.
7. to offer a graduate level course in a developing country.

This course changes the career plans of many of the participants. Some report that the course helped them decide upon a career, others report that it has broadened their view of public health, regardless of the career they ultimately choose.