The Nursing division in the SU Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences has embarked on a strong, goal-directed course of action to orientate its postgraduate students in evidence-based nursing, and at the same time instil in them nursing basics such as caring, compassion and support for patients.

“We have been setting specific goals for the nurses who have enrolled for postgraduate education and training at Stellenbosch University,” says Dr Ethelwynn Stellenberg, who was appointed acting head of the Division in July 2012. “We are endeavouring to teach them to look and think critically about everything they do to ensure that they are fully equipped to manage their patients.”

Since research is an integral part of postgraduate training and education at SU, Stellenberg and her team are also encouraging and supporting the students to focus their research projects on relevant, health-related issues and to ensure that the research can be translated into practice – so much so that the Division awards a special prize, known as the Dr Gorvalla Award, to graduates who are successful in translating their work into practice.

Thus the 2011 winner of the Gorvalla award for excellence in nursing leadership, Ms Volene Werely, focused her Masters research on one of the prevailing problems of tuberculosis when she identified the reasons (or problems) that cause patients to drop out of treatment programmes. This is a huge problem because TB bacteria develop drug resistance when a patient interrupts or discontinues his or her medication. Drug resistant TB is difficult to treat and requires a long and expensive treatment regime. Werely found that patients who drop out of treatment programmes often experience social problems and absconded from hospitals unless these problems are addressed with the help of a social worker.

Werely’s auditing instrument of patient records, specifically those of TB patients, is now implemented at various other hospitals, Stellenberg says.

The Nursing Division of the SU want to turn the profession around by addressing vulnerabilities and re-establishing the nurse as a caring, compassionate and supportive member of the health care team.

The Division has also instituted an annual award for academic excellence in research for a student who graduates cum laude and with the highest marks in the Master’s degree programme. This award is sponsored by Elsevier.

Masters of Nursing

The Masters of Nursing programme comprises two streams, namely a Research Masters degree for students who have an Honours degree, and a two-year structured programme for those students with a postgraduate diploma or basic degree. The Masters degree is a selection programme, subject to specific criteria that include a minimum achievement of 65% in the last academic postgraduate qualification.

As part of a concerted effort to develop Nursing as a research-intensive Division, Stellenberg and her team have implemented a range of measures to strengthen the Masters in Nursing programme to make it more student-friendly. All these measures are aimed at encouraging close co-operation between the students and the lecturer-facilitator to whom they are assigned when they enrol in the programme. These include telematic broadcasts; face-to-face interaction between students and lecturer-facilitators on Skype and at workshops presented at the Faculty, as well as an open-door approach which ensures that lecturers are always available when students wish to see them.

“Over the years we became increasingly perturbed by the high drop-out rate among students who enrol for the Masters degree,” Stellenberg says. “The drop-outs usually spiked when students had to hand in their first assignment. We therefore went out of our way to determine why they drop out and how to remedy the situation.”

One of the most important remedies they devised was the
introduction of a pre-register induction programme which clearly explains the nature and requirements of the Masters programme.

In 2009, the Division received international funding to present the first induction workshop. Today, it is a compulsory five-day workshop for all aspirant Masters students, and it brings them face-to-face with demands of the programme and enables them to decide whether they will be able to meet these demands before they register.

“This approach was extremely successful. It also helped us to understand that the students leave the programme not because of academic ability or their studies, but as a result of problems related to personal issues such as finances, domestic difficulties, pregnancies and others. Since the introduction of the workshop and other initiatives, the drop-out rate has declined from almost 80% to only 10% to 20%.”

Electronically-assisted teaching and learning plays a huge role in the current success of the programme and computer literacy is compulsory for students who wish to enter the programme. Thus many of the activities during the induction week are focussed on computers and the use of the Internet, including the electronic use of the library and the study guide. It also includes an

Drs Ethelwynn Stellenberg (right) and Kate Joyner (centre) were appointed to participate in a national project to develop as lead researchers in Nursing as part of a FUNDISA and NRF pilot study. With them is Prof Marina Clarke, former Head of Nursing.

Ms Volene Werely (centre) received the Dr Pat Gorvalla Award for Excellence in Nursing Leadership, which is awarded to the student who has obtained her/his degree at Stellenbosch University and has translated her research in the clinical or education environment. With her are flr Ambassador James Joseph, professor at the Duke University, North Carolina USA, Ms Terry Wulff who received the Elsevier Award for Academic Excellence in Research, which is awarded to the student who achieved the highest marks with cum laude, Mrs Mary Braxton-Joseph, Ms Werely, Dr Ethelwynn Stellenberg and Prof Marina Clarke of Nursing.
Nursing strengthens research and evidence-based education

Introduction to scientific writing and talks on research methods. “As a result of these interventions, 26 M-students graduated in 2010 and while another 27 students were awarded M-degrees in Nursing in 2011. We have now set a target completion rate of 25-30 students annually,” Stellenberg says.

Doctors of Nursing

According to Stellenberg, there is also a renewed interest in the doctoral degree, offered by the Division. The educational trust fund, SANTRUST - which is funded by the Irish Government - in partnership with the SA National Research Foundation, has identified Nursing as a ‘vulnerable science’ in South Africa and has offered a ‘Pre-doctoral Proposal Development Programme’ to develop Nursing scientists in South Africa. “SU Nursing has been fortunate in that our applications for support for seven candidates - six of whom are lecturers in Nursing - were accepted. Of the seven students who have applied for the programme, five will register with the SU Nursing division next year.”

In partnership with the NRF, the Forum for Nursing Departments in South Africa (FUNDISA) has introduced a pilot study to develop lead researchers and SU was given the opportunity to develop two lead researchers in Nursing. These positions are filled by Stellenberg and Dr Kate Joyner. They are expected to put together a research team and lead a research project over a period of five years. This will include the writing proposals and accessing international funding to promote research and scholarship in Nursing.

Stellenberg says the SU Division also hopes to take the lead in continued professional development (CPD) programmes, with various disciplines in the Nursing Division running short courses.

Apart from Honours, Masters and PhD degrees in Nursing, the Division also offers a vastly popular one-year Postgraduate Diploma in Nursing in seven specialities namely two non-clinical programmes comprising management and education; five clinical programmes in primary health care including advanced midwifery, advanced psychiatry, critical care nursing and operating room nursing; a certificate course in basic midwifery and in the management of antiretroviral and TB treatment (CMART) – a field in which the Division has taken the lead nationally. They apply a blended approach in teaching learning which includes the SU’s Interactive Telematic Education platform. The programmes attract students from all over South Africa and as far as Saudi Arabia.

Stellenberg says Nursing in South Africa has taken some hard knocks over the past two decades and all the activities in the SU Division are aimed at turning the profession around by addressing vulnerabilities and re-establishing the nurse as a caring, compassionate and supportive member of the health care team.

“We endeavour to do this by offering leadership in our field of expertise, as well as excellent research and evidence-based education and training.”

The Division of Nursing, in collaboration with the George and Annie Starck Retirement Home, introduced a quality assurance programme to monitor and evaluate the nursing care being rendered in the frail care unit, as part of their community engagement activities. In addition, together with the Management Board, they are exploring the possibility of introducing an Alzheimer’s Unit at the home. Seen on the photo is dr Ethelwynn Stellenberg (right front) with the management team of the Retirement Home.