

Boosting health through football

A project in South Africa is using the World Cup to engage young patients, writes **Crispin Andrews**

South Africa's passion for football, demonstrated so clearly during this summer's World Cup, came as no surprise to British nurse Marcus McGilvray. For the past five years, the former UK-based district nurse and HIV specialist has been using the nation's infatuation with football to encourage young South Africans to engage with health services.

Ten days before the first of Africa's World Cup matches, Mr McGilvray opened the WhizzKids Health Academy, an extension of the WhizzKids United programme he developed via his charity Africa-aid. This youth-focused initiative aims to 'deliver effective HIV prevention, care, treatment and support through the medium of football'.

Teaching life skills

WhizzKids offers a 16-hour life skills curriculum, which uses football as an analogy for life; it also runs an 'all life skills' course where the graduates are rewarded with a mixed-gender, World Cup-style football tournament to celebrate their achievement. Students from the life skills course who display leadership potential are trained to deliver education workshops to their peers.

A tailored version of the programme, relevant to British teenagers, has also been trialled, with support from top UK football clubs. Over a year-long pilot, around 350 young people took part in 'Life Skills Football Training', which uses football to teach young people how to establish realistic life goals and design strategies to achieve them.

The WhizzKids Health Academy, located in Edendale, a town on the



An on-site football pitch attracts young people to the clinic's health services

outskirts of Pietermaritzburg in the KwaZulu Natal region, is the first of its kind in South Africa. It provides a full range of free professional health and counselling services including HIV testing, treatment and management of STIs, administration and management of anti-retroviral therapy (ARV), psycho-social support groups for children living with HIV/AIDs and rape counselling.

The young people who attend, many of whom are orphans, can also access career guidance and support, plus a computer suite. The key draw, however, is use of a five-a-side, all-weather football pitch. Clinics are

integrated with football, to make them as child-friendly as possible.

'We use football to encourage young people to come to a place where they can access daily health services,' says Mr McGilvray. 'People know us from the football courses, so it doesn't have the stigma attached to clinics and adolescents can receive personalised support.'

He explains that in parts of South Africa where HIV is rife, adolescents require focused interventions in order to stay safe and healthy; many young people lack the societal support structures taken for granted in the UK and health professionals have difficulty reaching them once

they leave school. Poverty, unemployment and crime are a part of everyday life for many Edendale residents and the town has the highest rate of HIV in KwaZulu Natal.

Mr McGilvray has drawn on skills developed in the UK, where he worked at London-based sexual health clinics and as a district nurse in Kent, a role that taught him to look beyond the immediate and obvious when making needs assessments.

Replicating former success

He modelled the Edendale Health Academy on a similar organisation he helped establish in Ghana, before moving to South Africa to support the KwaZulu Natal Department of Health establish an ARV patient pathway.

After working on the department's patient literacy programme and ARV training for health professionals, Mr McGilvray secured government backing and private sponsorship to develop the academy in South Africa.

Since its June opening, more than 600 youngsters have accessed the academy's services. The South African Department of Health funds a family planning nurse, nurse counsellor and seasonal doctor, while WhizzKids manages the academy and facilitates the football.

'Resources are scarce so we want to get the private sector involved in financing the building of academies, while government provides medical staff,' says Mr McGilvray.

As the academy's chief executive officer, he liaises with the South African Department of Health and reports that ministers are interested in rolling out the model in other parts of the country, while Swaziland may also trial the concept.

This enthusiasm has been spurred by the World Cup and Mr McGilvray is keen to capitalise on this momentum to ensure a lasting legacy for South Africa that boosts access to football and, ultimately, improves health.

WhizzKids United

- Delivers HIV prevention, care, treatment and support to young people through the medium of football, which 'speaks a universal language that transcends culture and background'.
- Teaches 'life skills' around personal, physical and social development, rewarding graduates with a World Cup-style tournament.
- Enables peer education workshops and provides holistic, long-term support in an adolescent-friendly environment.
- Runs programmes in South Africa, Uganda, Ghana and Australia (working with Oxfam to help children from aboriginal backgrounds).
- Piloted adapted 'Life Skills Football Training' in the UK, with help from schools and the community development arms of football clubs including Manchester United and Arsenal.
- Find out more at www.whizzkidsunited.org