

## The wisdom of WiSDOM: statistics and reflections unfiltered

Dear Witsie,

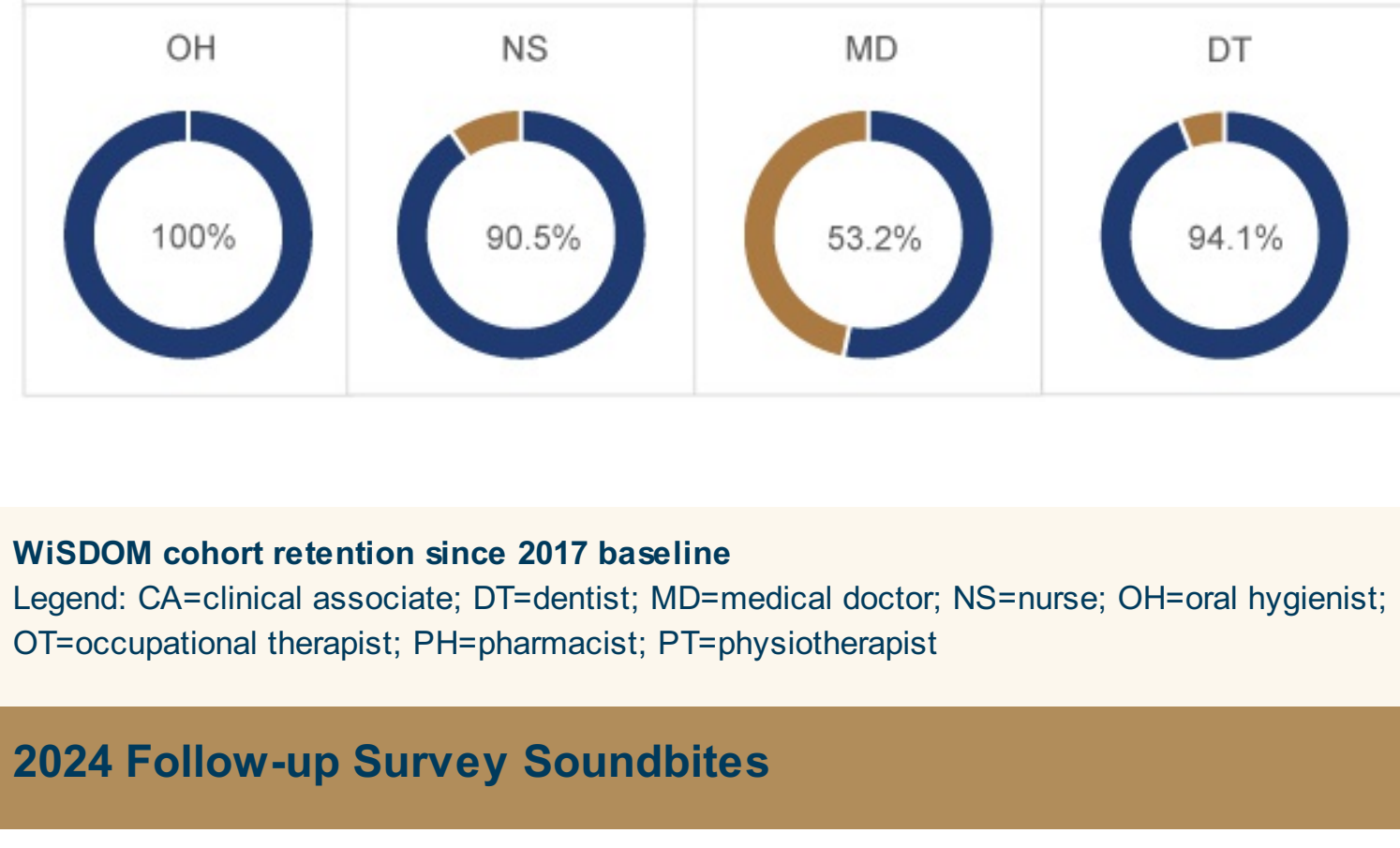
As you can see from the title of the newsletter, in this 8<sup>th</sup> year of follow-up, we are trying a slightly different format. We are adding personal reflections to the study findings, especially the two main outcomes of your long-term career choices and job locations. We are grateful to those of you who have agreed to share your journeys since graduation from Wits University in 2017. Unfortunately, some of you experienced personal tragedies and were unable to share your stories in this year's newsletter.

We are humbled by your continued participation in the WiSDOM cohort study and will send the 2025 survey link to you during September 2025.

### WiSDOM Cohort Retention since 2017

The graph below shows the proportion of study participants that we have retained in the cohort until 2024.

We have maintained an overall response of 68.1% of the original cohort. This ranges from 53.2% for medics to 100% of oral hygienists.



#### WiSDOM cohort retention since 2017 baseline

Legend: CA=clinical associate; DT=dentist; MD=medical doctor; NS=nurse; OH=oral hygienist; OT=occupational therapist; PH=pharmacist; PT=physiotherapist

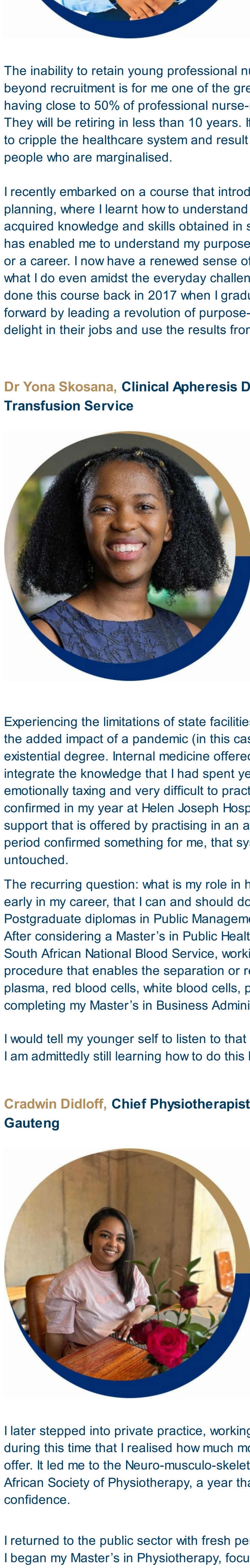
### 2024 Follow-up Survey Soundbites

- 43.4% of the WiSDOM cohort are working in their profession in the public sector, while 39.9% work in their profession in the private sector.
- 51.1% of the cohort are working in the public sector, but this ranges from 0% of oral hygienists and dentists to 79.9% of medical doctors. Except for medical doctors, the majority of the other 7 health professional groups work in the private sector.
- The three top reasons for working in the private sector are: opportunities for professional advancement (26.8%); no public sector posts (22.9%) and good working conditions (20.9%).
- 38.7% of medics, 5.6% of dentists, and 7.5% of pharmacists are in the process of specialisation, whereas 22.2% of nurses and 5.7% of pharmacists have already completed a specialist qualification.
- Although there have been slight improvements in reported workload, 59.7% of you reported a heavy workload, compared to 62.2% in 2023.
- The score for overall job satisfaction was 7.1 out of 10, which is similar to the 2023 score. The lowest score for overall job satisfaction was for nurses (5.9/10) and the highest for dentists (8.1/10).
- Your self-reported quality of life score remained at 6.7 (out of 10), the same as in 2023.
- The majority of the retained cohort are in South Africa (89.7%), with the remaining 10.3% located in 13 other countries.

The majority of the WiSDOM cohort members who remain in South Africa are still in Gauteng (73.2%).

### Cohort Members' Journeys since Graduation

#### Lungile Gamede, Professional nurse and midwife



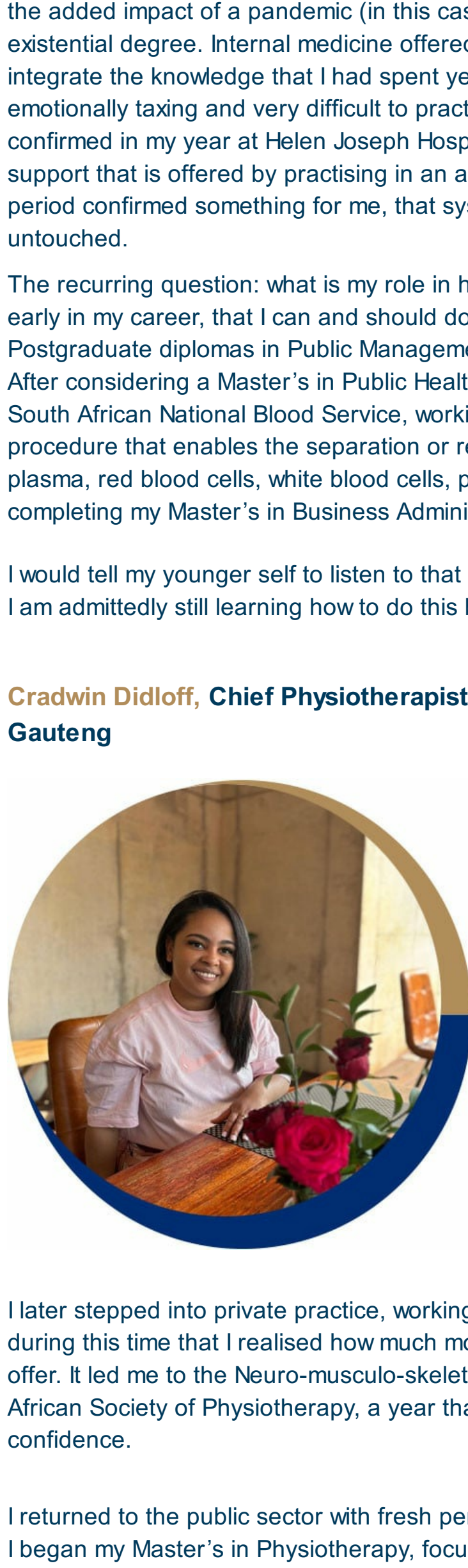
The WiSDOM study is now in its 8th year and well on its way towards contributing to health policy development, and human resources for health planning in South Africa.

It truly is the embodiment of "living" research and an advocacy tool to inform transformation in the training and placements of healthcare workers at such a pivotal time of transition towards Universal Health Coverage.

The inability to retain young professional nurses-midwives within the public health system beyond recruitment is for me one of the greatest challenges, amidst an imminent crisis of having close to 50% of professional nurse-midwives in the country over the age of 50. They will be retiring in less than 10 years. If nothing is done about this issue, this is sure to cripple the healthcare system and result in a decline in health outcomes, especially for people who are marginalised.

I recently embarked on a course that introduced me to the foundations of career planning, where I learnt how to understand myself better and align my innate gifts with my acquired knowledge and skills obtained in school to solve problems and succeed. This has enabled me to understand my purpose as a nurse-midwife, beyond it just being a title or a career. I now have a renewed sense of purpose and agency and find satisfaction in what I do even amidst the everyday challenges. I wish I had been just as intentional and done this course back in 2017 when I graduated. Nevertheless, I now aim to pay it forward by leading a revolution of purpose-filled professional nurses-midwives who delight in their jobs and use the results from the WiSDOM study to effect change.

#### Dr Yona Skosana, Clinical Apheresis Director, South African National Blood Transfusion Service



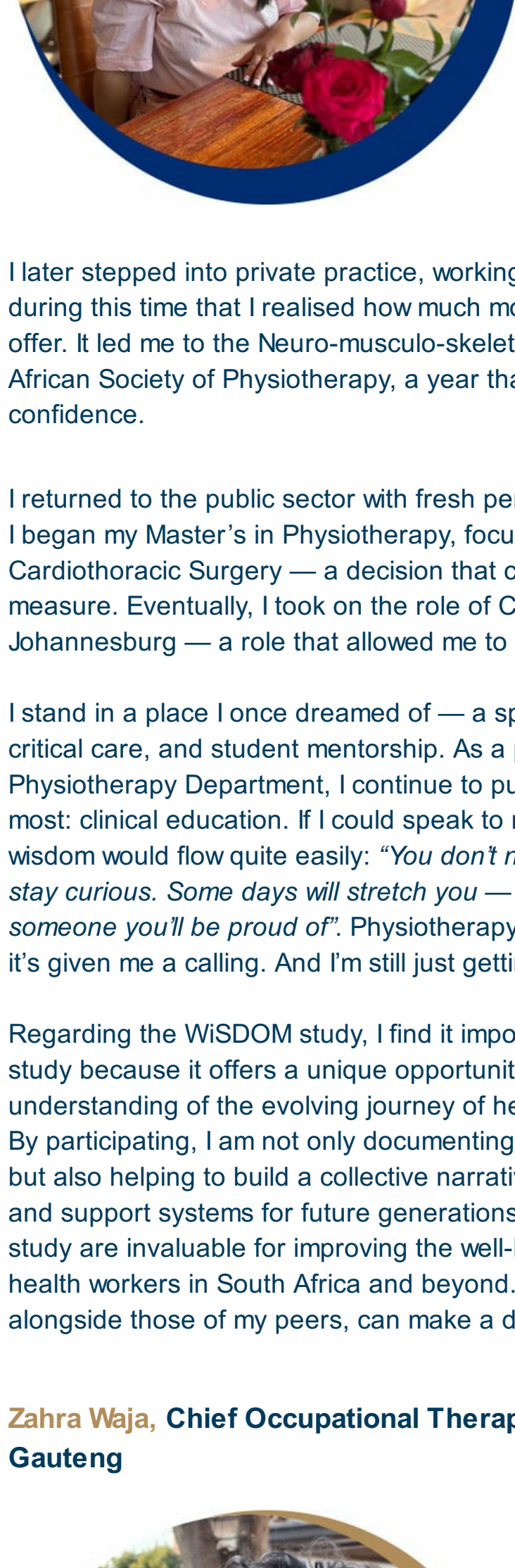
My first interaction with the WiSDOM study was in the final year of my undergraduate MBBCh studies in 2017, with a world of possibilities ahead of me. My focus was on successfully finishing my degree and being able to provide for myself. I thought two years of internship and rotations through various specialties would give me an idea of what to specialise in, because specialising was never in question. Internship in my hometown of Vosloorus was both a fulfilling and challenging experience. It was followed by a year at another regional hospital in Boksburg in 2020.

Experiencing the limitations of state facilities is a test of fortitude at the best of times but the added impact of a pandemic (in this case COVID-19), triggers re-evaluation to an existential degree. Internal medicine offered me a chance to connect with patients and integrate the knowledge that I had spent years gathering; but it was exhausting, emotionally taxing and very difficult to practise in a resource constrained setting. This was confirmed in my year at Helen Joseph Hospital. Until 2021, I yearned for the structure and support that is offered by practising in an academic hospital. However, this 12-month period confirmed something for me, that systemic problems leave no area or facility untouched.

The recurring question: what is my role in healthcare system? A niggling feeling from early in my career, that I can and should do more. So, I began furthering my studies. Postgraduate diplomas in Public Management and HIV Management were not enough. After considering a Master's in Public Health and not finding a post, I ended up at the South African National Blood Service, working in the specialised field of apheresis (a procedure that enables the separation or removal of specific blood components such as plasma, red blood cells, white blood cells, platelets, or stem cells). I am currently completing my Master's in Business Administration in Healthcare Leadership at Wits.

I would tell my younger self to listen to that little voice more often and trust the process. I am admittedly still learning how to do this but it's a journey I'm more than willing to take.

#### Cradwin Didloff, Chief Physiotherapist at a Public Sector Academic Hospital, Gauteng



When I graduated with a BSc in Physiotherapy from Wits, I stepped into a world with hope, excitement, and a heart wide open to learning. I didn't know then how deeply this profession would shape me — not just as a clinician, but as a leader, a teacher, and a person.

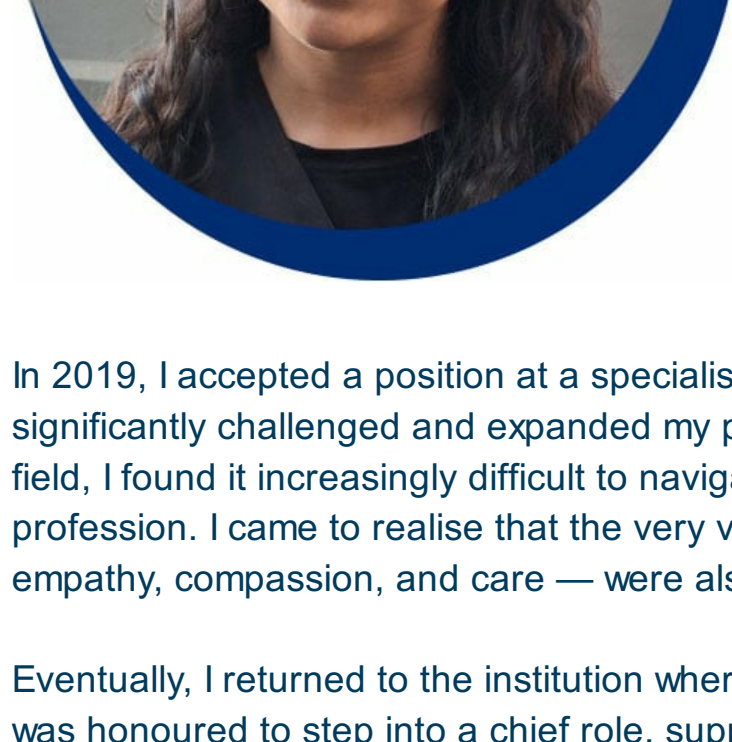
My journey began in a busy public hospital, where I discovered my love for ICU patient care and the quiet joy of student mentorship. That year planted the seeds for a career grounded in service and continuous growth.

I later stepped into private practice, working with orthopaedic and geriatric patients. It was during this time that I realised how much more I wanted to know — how much more I could offer. It led me to the Neuro-musculo-skeletal Physiotherapy course run by the South African Society of Physiotherapy, a year that deepened both my clinical skill and confidence.

I returned to the public sector with fresh perspective and deeper purpose. Along the way, I began my Master's in Physiotherapy, focusing on Respiratory, Cardiology, and Cardiothoracic Surgery — a decision that challenged and empowered me in equal measure. Eventually, I took on the role of Chief Physiotherapist at an academic hospital in Johannesburg — a role that allowed me to lead with both skill and compassion.

I stand in a place I once dreamed of — a space where I balance academic research, clinical care, and student mentorship. As a part-time associate lecturer in the Wits Physiotherapy Department, I continue to pursue the part of my work that fuels me the most: clinical education. If I could speak to my younger self 8 years ago, these words of wisdom would flow quite easily: "You don't need to know it all today. Be brave enough to *stay curious*. Some days will stretch you — but every moment will shape you into someone you'll be proud of". Physiotherapy has given me a career, but more than that, it's given me a calling. And I'm still just getting started.

#### Zahra Waja, Chief Occupational Therapist, Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, Gauteng



My journey as a healthcare professional began in 2018, when I had the privilege of completing my community service as a therapist at a leading academic hospital in the heart of Johannesburg. This formative experience laid the foundation for my career, as I began to appreciate the complexity and demands of working within the South African healthcare system.

In the face of limited employment opportunities, my commitment to remaining in the public sector led me to relocate to another province.

In 2019, I accepted a position at a specialised psychiatric hospital — a role that significantly challenged and expanded my professional capacity. As I progressed in my field, I found it increasingly difficult to navigate the emotional burden inherent in our profession. I came to realise that the very values that had drawn me into healthcare — empathy, compassion, and care — were also the ones most tested under pressure.

Eventually, I returned to the institution where I had completed my community service, and was honoured to step into a chief role, supported by the mentorship and guidance of those I had once trained under. This full-circle moment was both humbling and empowering.

If I could offer advice to my younger self, it would be this: surround yourself with people who are passionate about healthcare, who pursue continuous growth, and who are unwavering advocates for their patients. Although healthcare professionals face numerous systemic challenges — many of which are beyond our immediate control — we continue to make meaningful, daily impacts in the lives of our patients.

The WiSDOM Study has generated invaluable data that can help universities shape curricula to be more contextually relevant, better preparing young professionals to succeed in today's complex healthcare environment. Furthermore, the findings can support healthcare institutions and governing bodies in identifying ways to enhance both the personal and professional satisfaction of practitioners, particularly in rural settings, by addressing existing barriers.

The WiSDOM cohort has provided a vital platform for South African healthcare workers to reflect on how the health system has influenced our careers and lives — from job satisfaction to decisions around emigration. It has also offered future healthcare workers rare insight into the lived experiences of serving in this dynamic and often challenging sector.

### Publication on your Experiences during the COVID-19 Pandemic

At the end of 2024, we published a paper on your reported vaccination status, and personal and workplace experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2020, 22.6% of you reported COVID-19 infections but this increased to 45.3% by 2021. The composite index shows that doctors and nurses reported the lowest COVID-19 workplace support, while oral hygienists and dentists reported the most support. The regression analysis showed that doctors ( $p < 0.001$ ) and women ( $p < 0.05$ ) reported significantly lower workplace COVID-19 support scores. Those of you working in hospitals had 17.1% higher COVID-19 infections ( $p < 0.01$ ). The lack of a COVID-19 supportive workplace resulted in 15.7% higher infections among early career health professionals ( $p < 0.01$ ). The findings underscore the need for positive practice environments for early career health professionals in South Africa.

Should you wish to read the full paper, you can access it at here...