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Headline: [WATCH] What makes a good doctor? Why school marks aren't everything

Blurb: A doctor's race and the language they speak can play a role in the kind of care they provide - depending on their patient's race and language.

Bullets

- Students with better matric marks are more likely to do well in the theoretical part of medical school, but not necessarily the practical side (when they treat patients).
- English and Afrikaans speaking doctors often struggle to communicate with black patients who don't speak these languages, which can make it harder for them to provide quality care.
- Research from the US shows that black doctors are often more successful at treating black patients than white doctors.

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How should South African medical schools choose who gets in?

Some say the answer is simple – just pick the people with the best marks, and ignore things like race.

But research paints a more complex picture.

Marks do play a role in the making of a good doctor but they're not everything.

Students who score high grades in the National Benchmark Tests and matric do go on to get better marks in the theoretical part of the medical degree.

But they don't fare better when it comes to the part of the degree that teaches them to treat patients.

Then there's language.

Can the languages people speak influence what kind of doctor someone will be?

Research says yes.

English and Afrikaans speaking doctors often struggle to communicate with black patients who don't speak these languages.

This can lead to serious problems. Patients struggle to tell doctors what is wrong with them or to understand medical instructions.

Sometimes doctors can ask other staff members to help with translation, but this can lead to miscommunication, even when it's another medical professional helping.

What about race?

Evidence from the United States suggests that race can impact the relationship between doctors and patients even when they speak the same language.

A study of almost 2-million hospital births in the state of Florida found that Black newborns had a much lower chance of dying when the attending doctor was also African-American.

Black babies were more likely to die when their physician was white.

How much these findings apply to South Africa is hard to know.

Local researchers have seen individual cases where race seemed to have a negative impact on the relationship between doctors and patients — even when there weren't language barriers.

This story was produced by the Bhekisisa Centre for Health Journalism. Sign up for the newsletter.