

REBECCA CHITIMA-MATSIGA

UWC visit March 12 – April 16, 2012

Objective

Objectives of the study to collect qualitative and quantitative data about tobacco use for the (Prospective Urban Rural Epidemiological Study) PURE project.

Meeting with Dr. Puoane: (March 12, 2012) We discussed project and plan for assessing the data for Tobacco Use among the women PURE participants in Langa Township and the possibility of conducting focus groups.

Activities related to objectives

On my first week at UWC I was welcomed by Dr. Thandi Puoane and her research group to the School of Public Health (SOPH). I met the following Didi Gobile the administrative assistant and field workers, Kumbula, Kululwa (MPH student at SOPH), and Boniswa. I also met Nasheeta Solomons, Dietetics Instructor and PhD candidate in SOPH, Angelique Grosser (Intern from Bielefeld University and Ph.D candidate) Dr. Ehimaro Igumbor, Dr. Tubelihle Mathole, Dr. Patricia Struthers and others. I received the PURE packet from Didi which contained all data collection tools, and consent forms; Adult questionnaire, Family census questionnaire, Assessing neighborhood walkability, Household questionnaire, Physical activity questionnaire, quantitative food frequency questionnaire, and the 1 year follow up questionnaires. I spent time studying the surveys to get some idea of the type of data collected and getting acquainted with the PURE data collection process from the field workers. I was also introduced to the PURE website for acquisition of data. I also conducted literature searches on tobacco use in South Africa.

I also attended a presentation by Dr. Ehi, who gave an overview of the PURE project. The presentation was attended by myself and the dietetics students who were going to have research field training as part of their research requirement. Other attendees were Dr. Puoane, pre-doctoral research assistants and the field workers. The essence of the presentation was to explain the history of PURE and why it was necessary to focus on chronic diseases as they are increasingly becoming a major health concern in South Africa. The objective of the PURE study, he stated was to understand the risk factors associated with chronic diseases in different countries of various economic levels and geographic areas. The plan is to plan interventions that address these risk factors.

I joined the research team and the dietetics students on a field trip to Langa Township. I found out that Langa was divided into 3 parts, the Old Langa, the Zones and the hostels. On this day we visited Old Langa and the hostels only. The fieldworkers knocked on doors and in a very respectful manner asked the participants if they had time to answer questions for the 1 year follow-up survey. I observed the interview process along with one or two dietetics students. The surveys were conducted in English with addition of Xhosa when necessary. We met a retired school teacher in Old Langa. He seemed to be quite knowledgeable about research. After the interview he had a few concerns about where to get

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information about proper diet and wanted to know if UWC could do anything about cleaning up litter in some parts of Langa. It got me thinking that it might be a possible project for researchers interested in increasing awareness about Environmental health.

In the hostels, we met a grandmother who lived in what looked like a 1 room kitchenette with a bed on one corner a little stove on the other. She lived there with her 9 grandchildren. She was very pleasant and when we arrived, she was reading her bible while the youngest grandchild (about a year old) was taking a nap on the couch beside her. It was hard to imagine that she could live there with all those children and what kind of a life those kids had. I cannot stop thinking about her and her grandchildren who were mostly girls. I wonder what will become of them living in those conditions if no one intervenes.

My last week at UWC, was spent planning the focus groups. I Identified 4 groups of smokers and nonsmokers and compiled questions for both groups. In the end we decided not conduct focus groups due to shortage of time and lack of resources. Even though we did not conduct the focus groups, I extracted data from a sample of 200 participants out of a population of 2000 participants. I hope to write a proposal with Dr. Puoane and other interested researchers like Dr. Catley at UMKC and launch a study on tobacco cessation. To further explore the knowledge, attitudes and practices of the residents of Langa Township and the Western Cape regarding tobacco use and the tobacco control policies that have been implemented by the South African government. The data I collected will be used as baseline for a future study to conduct focus groups of smokers and non-smokers and find out what they think about the tobacco control policies and if they are affected by them. It will be interesting to determine if the policies are really having the intended effect of reducing tobacco use. I observed many young smokers and I believe there is a gap in knowledge about the effect of tobacco control policies on young adults in South Africa. My hope is to build on this cursory look at this very important topic and in the near future obtain the appropriate resources to return to South Africa and conduct the focus groups, photograph environmental cues about smoking, advertisements, price of tobacco products and conduct interviews about buying and selling of tobacco products. In the meantime, I hope to continue to work with Dr. Puoane and her research group to move this project forward and to work on other projects regarding chronic disease management and prevention.

This was an exploratory visit that allowed me to observe firsthand how research is conducted in South Africa. I was able to observe field workers conducting interviews with participants in the townships. It gave me insight into the cultural constraints and other considerations that need to be taken into account in conducting community based research. I was inspired consider conducting a similar study or outreach in the economically disadvantaged and underserved areas in Columbia, Missouri and the surrounding rural areas. I was impressed by the relationship that the field workers have built with this community and the trust that they have endeared. This is something that I would like to replicate here at the University of Missouri in order to reduce health disparities in minority and underprivileged communities in the US.

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Other activities at UWC

The following are other miscellaneous activities that I participated in while at UWC:

MPH graduation presentations, HIV workshop featuring many stake holders regarding improving health education of learners (students) and SOPH departmental seminar on the same topic by Dr. Patricia Struthers.

Dr. Eloise's presentation on the use of traditional healers in combatting Youth violence in South Africa and her visit to the Eastern province. This presentation was at the life sciences center and I also met Dr. Gail Hughes and the staff, researchers and students in the herbal sciences department.

I also conducted literature search on hypertension in South Africa for a manuscript Dr. Thandi Puoane was writing.

My reflections:

To say that there are many public health needs in Africa, is quite an understatement! At times I felt overwhelmed by the enormity of the problems (particularly when I visited Zimbabwe). But I am inspired by the indomitable spirit of the African people. They refuse to give up, they wake up every morning and work hard with the limited resources that they have. Even the faculty members at UWC, all work hard and do the best they can to educate their students. There is a very rigorous academic inquiry and a no nonsense approach to everything that they do. There is a candor that sometimes I do not see in the West and I hope to continue that in my work for the rest of my life. This has been a life changing experience for me. I now see my role in Public health service more clearly and I intend to carry on having been empowered by my experience on the Motherland. I hope to make a positive contribution wherever I am either in Africa or in the United States. I have experienced that my skills are valuable and I hope to use them to make this world a better place. I am grateful to Dr. Thandi Puoane and all the people at UWC SOPH for their hospitality. My gratitude also goes to the UMSAEP Committee members for selecting me for the award and Dr. Margie Sable who encouraged me to apply.