

CITATION FOR LILLIAN CINGO

Honorary graduand, Rhodes University, 8 April 2011

By Professor Paul Maylam

When one thinks of famous South African trains the one that immediately springs to mind is the Blue Train. But in the past two decades there has been a lesser known but much more important train with a very different role – the Phelophepa Train. While the Blue Train provides luxury travel for those who can afford it, the Phelophepa Train provides basic health care in remote areas for those who cannot afford it. It is a huge mobile clinic, and for fourteen years from 1995 it was managed by Lillian Cingo.

Phelophepa is a Sesotho/Setswana word meaning “good, clean health”. It is the name given to the world’s first primary health care train which began operating in 1994. Soon after Lillian Cingo became the on-board manager the train expanded into a huge rolling clinic, comprising sixteen coaches, carrying a permanent staff of nineteen together with thirty-six medical student interns, and offering an array of services: optometry and dentistry; cancer screening; testing for diabetes and HIV/AIDS; psychological counselling; serving as a pharmacy; and providing rural health education – sixteen people at each stop complete a five-day course in basic health care, first aid and hygiene. In this way over 6000 volunteers have been trained, taking this knowledge back into their communities.

The train travels around the country for nine months of the year, stopping at one place for five days or more. It has travelled over 180,000 kilometres since its inception. Staff now treat about 45,000 patients a year. For many it is the first time they have ever seen a doctor or nurse. Some walk 30 kilometres for treatment, or queue for two to three days. For the student interns the poverty witnessed is eye-opening:

encountering a person who has waited twenty years to get spectacles; coming across a family of ten sharing one toothbrush.

This is how a health service should operate – with total dedication on the part of management and staff; with an emphasis on primary health care and preventive medicine; with maximal utilisation of limited resources. The country owes a great deal to Lillian Cingo for her management of the Phelophepa Train. She is a wonderful role model for the country's health care professionals and workers.

She stands out as one of South Africa's most eminent nurses, who, over the years, has accumulated an array of qualifications and acquired a wide range of diverse caring skills. She comes from a great nursing tradition, having trained in the 1950s and 60s at mission hospitals until these institutions were destroyed by apartheid: training first at a Free State mission hospital, before moving on to the McCord Hospital in Durban, then serving as a senior staff nurse at Rietfontein and Baragwanath Hospitals.

She left South Africa for the UK in 1966, carrying with her considerable anger – such anger hardly surprising given that apartheid was making nursing a rigidly segregated profession in which black nurses received appalling treatment – paid far less than their white counterparts, not respected as professionals, expected to double up as domestic workers performing menial chores in hospitals.

While apartheid South Africa severely limited her opportunities, in London she was able to establish herself as a multi-faceted professional with expertise in diverse areas: a postgraduate training in neurosurgical and neurological nursing – enabling her to work as a specialist nurse in neurosurgery for thirty years; a diploma and masters degree in psychological counselling; registering as a midwife; earning certificates in

both tropical medicine and HIV/AIDS counselling. Lillian Cingo embodies the principle of lifelong learning – a dedicated professional who has combined daily work with an ongoing quest for fresh skills and new knowledge.

This remarkable nurse has been honoured with many awards – even in apartheid South Africa, winning a gold medal for best nurse in 1956, and another gold for best midwife in 1961; presented to the Queen in 1975 as best neurosurgical nurse specialist; twice nominated as nurse of the year in London in the 1970s; an award from the British Dental Association in 1998 for her role in bringing health care services to rural South Africa; joint winner in the health category of the Shoprite Checkers SABC3 Woman of the Year Awards in 2000; an Honorary Life Membership Award from the Nursing Forum in 2008; the Medical Companion Award from the South African Medical Association in 2009; four honorary doctorates, about to be five in three minutes time.

South Africa can count itself fortunate that Lillian Cingo returned to the country to manage the Phelophepa Train – variously described as “a miracle train”, “a train of hope”, as “the train with the soul so deep”. A train managed, until her retirement in 2008, by a woman for long passionate about the plight of rural people – “I know”, she says, “that those are the people who need most, yet they are the ones who have very little. And because they don’t complain, they tend to be forgotten”.

Rhodes is proud to honour Lillian Cingo tonight – a woman whose motto is “health for all, physically and emotionally, hand-in-hand with reconciliation and nation-building”; who places supreme value on human pride and dignity; who has been described as “a striking woman...[who] projects leadership and compassion at the same time”; described, too, as “a selfless and tireless workaholic”, and as “an unsung hero” who has done so much to help so many in their lives.

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to request you to confer on Lillian Cingo the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.