

# Manual to ensure state patients know their rights

## Access to public health care clarified

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THE DEATH, three years ago, of a Nyanga toddler who died on his grandmother's back as she went from one clinic to another seeking medical help for him is one case that inspired the creation of a manual about people's access to health services.

The Toolkit on the Right to Health contains practical information on patients' rights, advice on how to access basic health services, and which channels to use to lodge complaints.

It has been put together by Learning Network, an NGO at UCT, in partnership with the university and other civil society organisations such as Oxfam, Women on Farms, Ikamva Labantu and the Cape Metro Health Forum.

The manual is not only a source of information for patients, but may be used as a training tool for workshops on the right to health.

The university's Dean of Medicine, Professor Marian Jacobs, said at yesterday's launch that the toolkit – in manual, leaflet and CD form – would help the poor who had no access to the many different services to which all South Africans were entitled.

These included the rights to housing, sanitation, water and health care. Jacobs said that,



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despite the constitution guaranteeing them, most poor people were not aware of their rights.

She referred to the case of Nyanga toddler Unabantu Mali, who died in 2008.

Unabantu, a year old, was vomiting and had diarrhoea.

He was turned away by the Nyanga and Gugulethu community health centres and by the Gugulethu Maternal Obstetrics Unit.

Jacobs, who took part in the special investigation into Unabantu's death, said although the toddler had rights, among them the right to health care and identification, his teenage mother, Nonceba, and grandmother, Ntombizodwa Mali, were unaware of this.

Unabantu was born in the Eastern Cape, but he did not have a birth certificate and his mother did not have an ID.

Because of this, "his mother could not access social care for him", Jacobs said.

"They stayed in an area with no water or basic sanitation. He ended up dying on his grandmother's back."

The baby and his mother had

been denied their right to identity and to basic services, and his mother had no idea she could challenge the system, Jacobs said.

But Unabantu's plight was a common one and the toolkit had been designed with his family and others in similar situations in mind.

Dr Pregs Govender, deputy chairwoman of the Human Rights Commission, said the toolkit would ensure that the rights of South Africans "are not only on paper, but people can now start exercising these rights using the toolkit, and challenge the government and hold Parliament accountable".

Nicolé Fick, research co-ordinator of the Learning Network, said work had begun on the toolkit in 2008 after a number of NGOs asked the Network for guidance in identifying violations of health rights and responding to such violations.

"One such case involved a woman who went to a clinic for contraceptives, but was told that she couldn't get such contraceptives unless she tested for HIV."

The toolkit contained examples of problems and solutions, and would enable organisations working in the health arena to help patients identify violations and advise them on what steps to take to seek redress.

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