

Students' 'Life Pod' project can save up to 100 lives per year

A group of Stellenbosch University medical students is on a mission to establish a specialised intensive care unit (ICU) for organ donors at Tygerberg Hospital.



Source: Supplied. The Tri for Life team are Jonty Wright, Gerhard Neuwoudt, Alexander Van Wyk, and Henri Van Der Westhuizen.

This dedicated unit, dubbed the “Life Pod”, aims to significantly boost the hospital’s capacity for posthumous organ transplant, potentially saving up to 100 lives annually.

This Life Pod – a first of its kind in Africa – will provide life support to consented organ donors to keep their organs viable until it can be harvested for transplantation.

“This specialised unit will safely house donors for the 12 to 36-hour period before surgery, instead of letting their life-saving organs go to waste,” says Naazim Nagdee, a fourth-year medical student and vice-president of Save7, a student-led non-profit organisation focused on organ donation awareness.

The students’ initiative stems from a personal experience. “We recently encountered a family desperately seeking a kidney for their six-year-old son,” says Suhayl Khalfey, manager of Save7’s Tygerberg Branch.

“Tragically, the timing of the availability of organs and potential transplant did not align, and a vital opportunity for a

transplant was missed. This Life Pod could prevent such losses in the future.”

The group of medical students, alongside faculty members from the departments of surgery and internal medicine, have identified a room in the hospital that could be converted into a Life Pod. They’ve received the green light from hospital administration and secured the support of departments crucial to the Life Pod’s day-to-day operations.

“The last hurdle is raising R400,000 to convert this room into a ‘pop-up’ ICU,” explains Sachen Naidu, a core member of Save7. They’ve partnered with The Health Foundation, a public healthcare supporter, who will match each rand raised by the students.

Taking their commitment a step further, four students – Henri van der Westhuizen, Gerhard Niewoudt, Alexander van Wyk and Jonty Wright – competed in the Ironman 70.3 in Nelson Mandela Bay on 21 April 2024. Their campaign, aptly named “Tri for Life”, aims to raise awareness of the cause, and garner vital funds for the Life Pod. They raised R200,000.

SA's organ donor shortage

“We can’t wait until we’ve graduated to start helping the 5,000 South Africans waiting for transplants,” says Save7 president Jonty Wright. “Recent national public-sector budget cuts have exacerbated the issue, with limited ICU beds adding to the loss of potential donors. Each donor represents up to seven lives that could be saved.”

Save7, established in 2021 by Wright and his fellow students, was born from witnessing the heartbreak of families desperately awaiting organ donations. Their core message is powerful: by registering as an organ donor, individuals have the potential to save seven lives after they die.



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“Year after year, we see patients deteriorating while waiting in vain for a life-saving organ,” explains Wright. “The realisation that a well-equipped and staffed room could be the key to getting these organs to those who need them most was the catalyst for action. Together with Tygerberg Hospital staff, we identified a suitable room and began mobilising.”

The students have already sourced all the necessary equipment for the Life Pod, including an ICU bed, monitors, a ventilator, and essential medical lines. Additionally, they have a network of volunteers ready to support the medical staff.

A beacon of hope

Elmi Muller, dean of Stellenbosch University’s faculty of medicine and health sciences and president of The Transplant Society, an international leader in transplantation, voiced her support for the Life Pod project.

“In my experience as a transplant surgeon, I have borne witness to the profound tragedy of organ shortages and the life-affirming joy experienced by patients and their families upon receiving a life-saving organ.

“The establishment of this Life Pod will have a transformative impact on the lives of organ recipients, offering a beacon of hope and the very essence of life during their most critical moments. I commend the Save7 team for undertaking this crucial initiative and extend my unwavering support to this project,” says Muller.

“This Life Pod represents a major advancement in our fight to save lives through organ donation,” says André van der Merwe, head of transplant surgery and urology at Tygerberg Hospital and Stellenbosch University.

“Witnessing the next generation of medical professionals leading this vital project with such passion and determination is truly inspiring.”

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