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Perceptions of patient (un)worthiness exist among clinicians – UCT study

Socially marginalised people, from sex workers to members of the LGBTQ+ community and the unhoused, may be deemed unworthy of scarce human and financial resources to promote health and treat illness.

A University of Cape Town (UCT) study in [Health Sciences Education](#) by Dr Sara Jacobson explored why perceptions of patient unworthiness persist among clinicians in South Africa.

Titled "*There is a human being there*": A Critical Pedagogic Approach to shifting perceptions of patient worthiness in South Africa, this PhD thesis found that current in-service learning strategies to address unequal treatment in the primary health care facilities have not resolved the problem.

"Worthiness determinations on the part of clinicians, support staff and patients from the general population justify dehumanising actions that harm socially marginalised patients, maintain social and institutional hierarchies, and preserve the unequal status quo," said Jacobson.

In this study, a group of nurses and cross-border migrants – a socially marginalised group – engaged in dialogue and critical reflection for a year.

"Critical reflection on problematic assumptions, motivations and beliefs through dialogue provides an alternative to traditional in-service "sensitisation" training and holds promise as a strategy to deter worthiness determinations and counter the motive to justify unequal systems," said Jacobson.

She said the research project emerged from a desire to understand why some patients in South Africa are considered more worthy of care than others, and a belief that conventional in-service training to address unequal treatment is ineffective.

Jacobson said perceptions of patient (un)worthiness impact health-seeking behaviour and outcomes. "Those deemed unworthy may receive inferior care or be denied health services altogether."

Jacobson completed a Bachelor of Arts in African American Studies, a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, a Master of Public Health in International Health and Development, and a Graduate Certificate in Instructional Systems Development. She graduated for her PhD in Health Sciences Education at UCT's Sarah Baartman Hall on Tuesday, 9 September 2025.

Note to editors: The group that participated in this project is willing to engage with the media.

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