

Construction hero excels in marathon to produce Covid-19 hospital beds

In April, it was projected that South Africa's healthcare facilities and hospitals would need between 4,100 and 14,767 ICU beds to manage the expected Covid-19 peak, but there were only 3,318 available at that time. In light of this, the construction and allied industries have been working around the clock to prepare for the onslaught of the pandemic.



Kwazi Dladla, junior foreman at GVK-Siya Zama

One of these companies was GVK-Siya Zama, which received an order to create 24 new isolation beds at Clairwood and Wentworth hospitals in Durban. The company has extensive medical construction experience and just before lockdown completed an ICU/isolation section at a private hospital, also in Durban.

“An isolation bed is like an intensive care bed, but with a positively pressurised anteroom and access control to prevent the spread of a virus,” explained Ryan Schneeberger, contracts manager for GVK Siya-Zama on the Wentworth site. “As the potential impact of Covid-19 became more apparent in March, health authorities recognised the shortage of isolation beds in the country. As lockdown had put a stop to approximately 99% of all travel, the safest and most efficient way that construction work could commence on these projects was to accommodate key workers on site.”

28-year-old steps up to the challenge

One such worker was 28-year-old Tshelemali Millionare Kwazi Dladla, also known as Kwazi, who was a junior foreman at GVK-Siya Zama. Kwazi was chosen to work at the Wentworth Hospital site, where the company had to convert a derelict building into an eight-bed isolation unit in only 35 days. He was one of four core workers who lived in park homes on-site for the duration of the project.

“Not only was the Wentworth project deadline-driven and technically demanding, but the team had to deal with the new realities of Covid-19 during construction,” said Schneeberger. “We had to establish a core team on-site as well as off-site to manage the work and Kwazi was appointed as a junior foreman for the project – a step up from his previous position as supervisor. In a high-pressure situation such as this, where delivery was non-negotiable, you have to know everyone’s strengths and weaknesses and I knew he would be great for the job.”

Kwazi initially thought it would be a small project that entailed getting a building ready for patients. “But when I arrived on-site, there was specialist work such as installing air pressure systems and gas ducts. I also had to learn about Covid-19,” he said. “At one time, we had up to 75 people on site, including sub-contractors, so I had to make sure they all followed Covid-19 rules and that they sanitised and were socially distanced.”

Project scope expanded

Schneeberger explained that the scope of the Wentworth project had expanded beyond the original contract: “As we were able to successfully finish the isolation unit on time, we were asked to complete 22 quarantine beds as well, and these also included the same specialist air pressure systems as the isolation beds. This was followed by work on the Emergency and Pharmacy sections at the hospital to change the patient flow in line with Covid-19 requirements.” The experience of the GVK team at Clairwood was similar as their project grew from an initial build of 16 beds to 93 beds, now due for completion early in September.

The expanded scope of the project proved to be fertile learning ground for the young Kwazi. “He pinned his ears back and ran with it,” Schneeberger said, “He went above and beyond his normal duties and started assuming additional responsibility. These included organising sub-contractors on-site, as well as implementing a mobile snagging application introduced to him by a colleague on another site. This entailed photographing snags and using WhatsApp to communicate immediately and seamlessly with subcontractors to expedite corrective action and final delivery.

Personal and professional growth

“Kwazi has shown tremendous personal growth and will be able to make a meaningful contribution to our steady supply of healthcare projects.” Schneeberger concludes saying, “The construction industry is such an experienced-based industry and Kwazi’s exposure and growth during this period is in sync with our company’s values of mentoring and guiding young, hardworking employees who are committed to improving their lives.”

“I have gained a lot of experience that I wouldn’t have had without being exposed to the Covid-19 pandemic,” concludes Kwazi, who has managed to turn his experience of a global pandemic into a positive one that will set him on the way to reaching his dream of becoming a site agent, one of the most senior production positions on a building site.