AFRICA – PART OF A GLOBAL TEAM

World Spirometry Day (WSD) is an awareness campaign offering people the chance to test their lung health. Health professionals around the world organise lung function testing events for the general public, known as spirometry events. During the first WSD, on 14 October 2010, a total of 102 487 lung function tests were performed globally with only twelve tests carried out in all of Africa. With the 2012 WSD campaign coinciding with the Olympic Games and the aim being to encourage people to exercise and look after their lungs regardless of their age or physical ability, what better time and place to stand up on behalf of Africa and get involved but from the expo of the Comrades Marathon, the biggest and best ultra-marathon in the world where 18 000 runners ran 89 km from Pietermaritzburg to Durban on 3rd June?

GETTING STARTED

On finding one major sponsor for the initiative an impassioned plea for voluntary assistance from like-minded medical professionals working in the field of spirometry was sent out via chat lines, word-of-mouth and the grapevine. The response from medical professionals and companies involved in respiratory healthcare from all over the country and neighbouring African countries was immediate and overwhelming. Suppliers, technicians, operators and individuals rallied, forming a committed and professional team from the outset. The weeks and last days leading up to the event were frenetic. Thirty-two spirometers, syringes and accessory equipment had to be sourced and verified through serial numbers, model and make. All equipment had to be signed off by the suppliers as calibrated and in good working order. Transportation arrangements, accommodation and meals were planned and organised for all involved from outside of Durban – without a budget. Each professional involved needed to provide all personal details as well as proof of qualifications and current registration. Disposables were estimated and sourced on a very limited budget. Once again, all the companies represented came through with donations of filters, mouthpieces, hand wash. Plans for training commenced – venues, manuals, refreshments, equipment and disposables for practicing. Medical forms for screening clients and operational plans were created. Guinness World Record pre-planning documentation was completed and plans made for the setting of the record. Tens of tables were drawn up listing and organising each and every facet of the training, testing and for a successful Guinness Record attempt.

TRAINING

In order to ensure that the highest standards of excellence would be evident in every area of the initiative, a Certificate of Competence in Spirometry Training commenced in the days leading up to the event. This was attended by 40 of the 60 participating professionals. The availability of the training was a draw card to many of those involved as they would not have been able to afford the spirometry training under normal circumstances. We spent three days reviewing the theoretical and practical aspects of spirometry testing. The days were long, 07h00 – 17h30, in order to be ready. Since the event, each participant has written theory and practical examinations and handed in portfolios, all of which prove their competence in spirometry.

WORLD SPIROMETRY DAY

On the 2nd June, set-up at the Comrades Expo commenced. This was a whirl of activity – bodies, technicians, IT specialists, equipment and disposables. Various problems were encountered and overcome, the most troublesome being setting up the spirometers onto new laptops and with new printers. Finally at 08h00 am on Thursday 3rd June, testing of members of the public commenced. Right from the outset, there were
queues of people who wanted their lungs tested and wished to be part of a global initiative for the good of all. The operators worked selflessly, barely breaking from 07h00 to 19h00. Some members of the team were on duty giving information about the event and the testing to passers-by, some assisted with queuing and completion of paperwork, some did blood pressure screening, and yet others height and weight measures. Machines were calibrated and records filed on a two-hourly basis. Approximately 750 and 880 individuals were tested on the first and second day respectively.

GUINNESS WORLD RECORD ATTEMPT
The Guinness World Record Judge arrived from the UK on Friday 1st June, bringing about the final plan for the Guinness World Record attempt operations – all whilst hundreds of persons were still being tested in honour of World Spirometry Day.

Finally, at 09h00 on Saturday 2nd June – after a last team meeting and in an atmosphere filled with anticipation, excitement and pride – the truly South African Vuvuzela was blown loud and clear marking the start of the record attempt for the Most Spirometry Tests Carried Out In Any One Event In Eight Hours. Activity was immediate as each person in the queue was marked and brought in to the testing area. Again, height, weight and blood pressure were measured and a screening questionnaire completed, before each client underwent the spirometric lung function test. The client blew until three acceptable and repeatable tests were obtained, ensuring that the data collected was valid both medically speaking and for the record attempt. After the first two to three hours the initial chaos died down to a buzz, with all machines, systems and processes in place and working well. The operators faithfully and systematically continued testing all day under the watchful eye of three very experienced spirometrists acting as Independent Witnesses and Quality Control Managers for the Guinness World Records. Except for random technical problems and machines that stopped working due to overuse, testing went well with each member of the team carrying out their individual roles with great responsibility. At 17h00 the Vuvuzela sounded the cut-off for testing numbers, amidst clapping and cheers. The final result was well over the minimum target set, with over 600 tests recorded of which 424 were considered acceptable and repeatable. WOW!!

THE FINAL DAY
The World Spirometry Day activities concluded the following day, with the team having moved all the equipment and setting up once again in a tent right at the finish of the Comrades Marathon to offer a final day of free testing for the general public. To our amazement, even some runners came to get tested, despite having just completed running 89 km!

LOOKING BACK …
What an awesome, memorable ride! The first thing that comes to mind is how unbelievably proud I am to have had the privilege of leading a group of truly professional individuals through a once-in-a-lifetime journey in carrying out spirometry testing for the first time in our country on over 2000 people over 4 days, including the successful setting of a Guinness World Record attempt. I am completely blown away by the support that has been shown by so many companies and organisations, and I am humbled by the personal sacrifices that were made from so many individuals on all levels to successfully carry out this initiative. There were many times in that week of flat-out 12-hour plus days that I watched in awe as each volunteer worked with all sincerity and all they had to offer, on a voluntary basis, overcoming frustrating technical and other issues. Personal issues were put aside, including deaths in the family, illness and other real and serious crises in order to see the project through. There were times when some were falling asleep in their 5 min breaks – that was for those who actually took breaks. I cannot thank each one enough or more sincerely.

I have never been more proud of the standard of spirometry in this country and to be a South African healthcare professional. Here’s to the next time!

Lindsay van der Linden

2170 in total tested
378 with obstructive /restrictive results (17.4% of the results)
1733 tested are normal
36 disqualified (not able to meet criteria for testing)
23 no results shown /inconclusive