

# St John Ambulance still serving after 1 000 years



*St John has been actively involved in South Africa healthcare for over 130 years*

**H**aving started during the first Crusade, The Order of St John is the only Order of Chivalry still performing work for which it was originally founded, "to alleviate the suffering of all mankind".

St John is a global non-profit organisation present in more than 40 countries with a member base of staff and volunteers exceeding 300 000 worldwide.

St John is an Order of Chivalry of the British Crown also known as an order of Hospitaler Knights formed as far back as 1070 AD. Through time, St John has evolved into a multicultural, charitable and respectable organisation with an aim to encourage, promote and support the communities in which

it holds a presence and to uphold the integrity of the Order of St John, committed to the service of others.

St John has been actively involved in South Africa healthcare for over 130 years, pioneering the earliest classes in first aid during the Zulu War and has developed into a diverse South African organisation which offers a bouquet of prehospital services. These include country specific first aid training, eye care including optometry and ophthalmology, home based care training and home care nursing for people living with chronic illnesses, as well as programmes in youth development and upliftment.

St John is based in eight major centres across six provinces with a

national footprint and further spread into parts of Southern African Development Community (SADC) and East African countries including Kenya, Zimbabwe and Mauritius.

St John Ambulance is a certified healthcare provider in Emergency Medical Services. St John Ambulance is unique in the industry as a doctor-led prehospital focused extension of St John with a niche in emergency medicine.

This extension of St John focusses on emergency/primary response, inter-facility transfers, and event medical coverage. The organisation has the ability to provide a full scope of emergency medical services for communities countrywide as well international clients.



*St John Ambulance head of special projects, Chris Martin; head of eye care, Fatima Hoosen and centre manager, Cathy Dedman, hold albums containing the history of the organisation. Photo: Shelley Kjonstad, African News Agency*

- ▶ Dr WP Tritton was regarded in Natal as the pioneer of St John Ambulance in 1886. Records show him as the examiner of a First Aid class held in uMzinto in 1886. While the centre in Durban was opened in 1906 and another centre in Pietermaritzburg a few years later, the St John Ambulance headquarters was opened in Epsom Road in 1932.

In 1909 the first horse-drawn ambulance used by the Borough of Durban was donated by the Natal Centre and St John trained men and women in first aid and nursing during World War I.

When riots broke out in Durban in 1948, an emergency hospital was erected at the Epsom Road headquarters and manned by St John Brigade members.

In 1955, at the laying of the foundation stone for the new headquarters in Old Fort Road, a sealed metal cylinder was buried in the wall. It contained coinage from a farthing to a five shilling piece, postage stamps of similar value, copies of the Natal Mercury newspaper and the centre's annual report. The metal cylinder cannot be removed until the building is demolished.

**Pilot project: mobile eye clinic**  
With almost 1 000 years of

history and the oldest charitable organisation in the world, this year (2022) St John Ambulance in Durban is spearheading a pilot project converting an ambulance into an eye clinic to head out into rural areas.

Filling a huge gap in affordable optometry services, as well as providing first aid and lifesaving skills and ambulance services, head of special projects, Chris Martin, said that the organisation's main goal was to assist in all communities.

Dating back to the first Crusade in 1099, Martin said it was the forerunner of the modern concept "to help all people". "It's an extraordinary organisation steeped in history and it's an organisation which transcends barriers. It is completely apolitical," he said.

When he was released from prison in 1990, South Africa icon Nelson Mandela was asked if he wanted his health to be checked and reportedly remarked, "not to worry, I'll go to my friends at St John". Mandela was appointed as a Bailiff Grand Cross of The Order of St John, while Archbishop Desmond Tutu was appointed Prior of The Order of St John.

Martin said that in the current climate, NGOs had to be sustainable and have a business element to

survive. "It's about making sure you have the right people and provide service excellence. The funds generated are ploughed back into the organisation," he said.

One of the key services offered is affordable eye care. St John Ambulance optometrist Fatima Hoosen said it had six clinics, two of which are in Durban and Pietermaritzburg. "We fill in the gap in the health system to provide affordable eye care. About 80 percent of people use public health in our country," she said, adding that one of the leading causes of blindness in South Africa was "uncorrected refracted error", which is caused by not getting glasses. "It gets worse and leads to blindness. A simple pair of glasses prevents that from happening," she said.

Hoosen said Durban would lead a new project in which an ambulance is currently being converted into an eye clinic to travel to rural areas. The funds for this project were raised at the organisation's annual Christmas Fair in Johannesburg last year. "We will take it (the new mobile clinic) into the community. We want people to have access to quality eye care and affordable glasses," she said.

Centre manager Cathy Dedman, who has volunteered for the organisation for more than 40 years, racking up an impressive 12 000 hours and is now employed at the centre, said it all started when she decided to take a first aid course "It's a lovely feeling to help somebody," she said, adding that their volunteer base had collapsed by 50 percent during the COVID lockdown.

During that time, St John ran courses on how to administer oxygen to home-based patients. Dedman said the organisation provided first aid training to corporates, as well as customised training, whether home-based care for an elderly person or first aid for babies or children.

She said volunteers were required to do 60 hours a year and to attend meetings 12 times a year. ▲