“In any health system, nursing is the backbone of the system,” says Bafana Msibi, Executive Manager for Compliance Inspections at South Africa’s Office of Health Standards Compliance. “In our country especially, and in other countries in Africa, primary health care is nurse-driven.”

As a health care executive with over 15 years’ experience, working for an independent body whose mission is to ensure quality of care and compliance with health standards in both public and private health care facilities, Bafana Msibi is well placed to assess the important contribution made by nurses to quality of health care.

He defines quality of care, in short, as “making use of the available resources to provide the best care to users.” Msibi acknowledges that good patient care requires a holistic approach that sometimes goes beyond clinical treatment. “You might see a patient presenting with symptoms, and as you try to treat her, you may find that these symptoms are caused by stress,” he says. Because nurses spend more time with patients than any other clinicians, their role is crucial. In addition, they are directly involved in the implementation of precautionary measures that promote a safe medical environment in their daily work.

In South Africa, all registered nurses have to undertake one year of community service after they complete their four-year degree. Working under the supervision of experienced professionals who mentor them, the new graduates are exposed to a wide range of medical issues. They also develop a solid understanding of the communities they serve. The knowledge and skills young nurses acquire during this period prepare them well for the demands of their profession.

“When I was young, I worked in a clinic in a rural area. If patients came with a problem that required the next level of care, we would refer them to the doctor or call an ambulance to take them to a hospital. There are clinics in most areas, and where there are none, mobile clinics carry out visits. Most of these clinics are nurse-run,” Msibi says.
In South Africa, some nurses hold high-level jobs as CEOs of hospitals or district managers, Msibi says, but more are needed in leadership positions. “The nursing profession needs to produce leaders for the health care system. They must be developed through the system, know it inside out, and they must also understand the processes of policy development within it.”

Bafana Msibi, who was able to conduct a study in a state hospital when he was studying for his Master’s in Public Health, would like more nurses to enjoy similar opportunities to undertake research. Having more nurses involved in policy-making as members of advisory committees, commissions and boards would also contribute to further improvements in the quality of care, he believes.

Msibi’s Office of Health Standards Compliance is currently negotiating a Memorandum of Understanding with the South African Nursing Council and other bodies representing medical professions to enhance cooperation across health services. Conducting joint inspections of hospitals, for example, could increase efficiency and help support high standards of care. “When we develop models and frameworks to improve quality, we must make sure they incorporate everyone and put the values of the profession up to the front,” Msibi says. “In the end, we are all interested in providing quality care and if you want to have quality, you have to ensure there is good team work.”