

FEATURE

CAREER

The pros of pro bono

Working for nothing doesn't seem like a good career move, but community service can do wonders for your job prospects and personal satisfaction levels

Ronwyn Masie (25) is a trainee doctor at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Gauteng. On a bad day, she will work 24 hours straight, followed by ward duty and a clinic visit.

"There are days when you feel you are being exploited and you're too tired to think straight," Masie says. "But the practical experience you gain is unbelievable. I don't think doctors in other parts of the world get the kind of exposure we do here."

In response to an uphill battle to attract doctors to rural areas, government introduced compulsory community service for health professionals in the public sector to force doctors to work in under-served areas. This means that after studying for six years, Masie is required to do an internship in a public hospital for two years and then one year of community service at another public institution, such as a primary health-care clinic or a far-flung rural hospital. From next year, students will have to do two years of community service.

"This means that before you are even

able to specialise, you will have worked for 10 years at very low pay and in difficult conditions," she says. "Paying off your student loan can take a lot longer than if you worked soon after you graduated."

Students studying health sciences, such as physiotherapists and pharma-

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cists, also have to do community service. But so far, commerce and legal students have escaped the requirement. Still, there are plenty of opportunities for students from all disciplines to contribute to society while getting practical experience and beefing up their CVs.

Street lawyers

Taswell Papier, a lawyer at Edward Nathan Sonnenbergs and chair of the Law Society of SA's pro bono committee, started doing pro bono legal work as a student at the University of

Cape Town (UCT). Pro bono is a long-established principle at legal firms whereby attorneys render their services to those who can't afford them.

"In SA there is a great need for legal assistance in areas plagued by poverty and illiteracy," says Papier. "Students can do amazing work to improve access to justice."

Soon, all lawyers will be required to do 24 hours of pro bono work a year to meet the target set out in the legal services charter, which aims to improve transformation in the legal profession.

Firms such as Leppan Beech have set up dedicated pro bono departments to deliver services to the poor.

"We wanted to be able to share our skills and experience to help the communities in which we work," says Leppan Beech director Tinyiko Kubayi. "This means representing low-income clients directly or indirectly by assisting the charitable organisations that work in these communities."

"Each one of our attorneys across a range of departments is required to dedicate a certain number of billable hours to pro bono work. And we

encourage them to take part in projects which they are passionate about."

While at university, students can volunteer to work at law clinics, such as those at the universities of Cape Town and Witwatersrand.

The UCT Law Clinic offers practical training for senior law students while operating as a fully functioning law practice. It employs a staff of five attorneys and one candidate attorney.

The clinic has two sections: a litigation practice, which offers students their

