

Doctors lose patience

First ever strike

The public sector has been bleeding doctors to the private sector and overseas, but some have dedicatedly continued their work despite difficult conditions.

Phophi Ramathuba tells how they finally lost patience with government and conducted the first ever national doctors' strike in South Africa.



“Ask what not your country can do but what you can offer.” This time honoured quotation seems to have enslaved public servants generally and medical practitioners in particular. Survival in the most under privileged areas is dependant entirely on prayer. To put the doctor's strike in a proper perspective, background information is necessary.

EROSION OF PUBLIC HEALTH

Prior to 1994, the ANC was guided by a progressive document titled the Reconstruction & Development Programme (RDP). This policy was served with divorce papers in 1996 in favour of the neo-liberal GEAR (Growth Employment & Redistribution) which cut public and social expenditure. After this we saw the closure of the Hillbrow and Kyalami hospitals.

Globalising capital can only operate in a flexible environment. This left the public sector reeling and working conditions worsened. The lack of political will was shown

in government's failure to prioritise public health, which resulted in a continuous deterioration of the health system until its current state of crisis.

The two-tier health care system with massive inequalities in health services made the situation worse and resulted in an inability to provide health care for all. About 60% of resources are used in the for-profit private health sector, mainly through medical schemes, which serve only 14 million people in a population of 40 million. The rest rely on the public health sector, which operates on 40% of health care funding.

OSD

Sama (South African Medical Association) research shows that in recent years the majority of doctors, on whom South Africa spends millions of rands to train, as well as other health professionals, have left the country because of low pay and poor working conditions. Many doctors have also opted to work in the private sector

leaving those remaining in the public sector abused and overworked.

With a crumbling public sector and after the huge public sector strike in 2007, government agreed to introduce the Occupation Specific Dispensation (OSD). This was a unique and competitive remuneration structure aimed at enhancing the recruitment and retention of skilled health workers. Nurses received their OSD in 2008 and doctors were supposed to follow thereafter. Under Minister Manto Tshabalala Msimang this implementation failed to take place.

REACHING BOILING POINT

After the ANC's Polokwane conference the president and a significant number of ministers resigned, and Barbara Hogan became Minister of Health. She however did not help matters with her focus on over expenditure of the budget which she witnessed during the implementation of the nurses' OSD. She commissioned actuarial scientists to look at

costing, with a view to implementing the OSD. Doctors' anger began to brew.

April 2009 was to be the final date for implementation. Doctors patiently waited for the day which came and went. Unions had several meetings with the ministries to try to sensitise them to the mood of doctors on the ground.

Sama resolved on a national march to the ministry of health on 16 April but because of the general election it did not take place. A number of members felt they had been sold out and wildcat strikes erupted at George Mukhari Hospital in Gauteng and doctors in the North West and Limpopo followed. Government realised that our warnings were correct.

Preoccupation with elections meant these strikes made little impact but it resulted in government for the first time tabling a Mickey Mouse offer on 24 April. When Sama suspended the strike, doctors were divided on whether or not to continue and some formed another organisation, the United Doctors Forum. It later died a natural death.

After the elections, the lid on the boiling pot could no longer be kept shut. The appointment of Dr Aaron Motsoaledi as Minister of Health was too little, too late despite his public apologies and commitment to resolving the OSD dispute. Doctors indicated that they no longer trusted government and their patience had worn out.

Medical practitioners flanked by civil society marched on the ministry as well as to health provincial offices country wide on 29 May to protest and demand action on the challenges they face both in the public and private health sectors. Minister Motsoaledi, accepted the memorandum which set a deadline of two weeks to implement the OSD.

HISTORIC STRIKE

Medical practitioners have always been members of a community. Having failed to respond to our memo, KwaZulu-Natal was the first province to withdraw labour. The laws of this country are not friendly to workers in the so-called essential services, equally the public.

The refusal of government, the employer, to sign a minimum service agreement has in the past prohibited doctors from participating in strike action. This time however doctors were not going to be stopped and they came out as workers on wild cat strikes.

For a full two weeks the country was under siege from men and women who had taken the Hippocratic Oath. During the strike on 24 June, the Minister of Health, announced an offer through the media. Many doctors saw this as a violation of bargaining protocol where an offer should be tabled for negotiation at the bargaining council.

Without excitement, doctors carefully studied the offer which confirmed their suspicions. The offer was seen as divisive as it only addressed a certain class of specialised doctors, general practitioners were not included. Medical schools have not yet been fully transformed which makes it difficult for working-class students to specialise or even to study medicine. Doctors vowed to support them and fight side by side.

Rural doctors were not catered for and the strike supported mainly those doctors servicing very poor communities. As a result a special clause to deal with junior consultants plus medical officers was put in place. The majority of unions signed the offer.

Doctors won between 11% and 44% for all categories and an agreement to review the OSD post

implementation. There was also recognition of doctors' years of experience. Those categories which received a lower increment will be renegotiated in six months time. There was also a commitment by government up to the president himself to addressing doctors' working conditions and the health sector in general.

Although doctors were not entirely happy with the settlement they are banking on the promised clauses.

Doctors have come a long way as they have come to understand the importance of being organised as labour and fighting like workers for their rights. The struggle is also to transform the health system, which has just begun. Sama will fight until every South African has access to a doctor and is provided with quality health care. These strikes should be seen as a revolution of the medical profession.

In the words of Fidel Castro, "We can condemn globalisation and we can condemn gravity. But it is more useful to devise strategies to deal with both realities." LB

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