

Editor's comment

Time to care more



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I was recently at a conference in Cape Town where I moderated a session on epidemics in Africa. One of the three speakers was Kgosi Letlape, well known to all of us and as outspoken as ever. Over lunch, before the afternoon session started, Kgosi outlined his problems with health care in this country. His main theme was that we cannot afford a two-tier system – the gap between rich and poor is too great for this to be sustainable. And certainly, our public health services are in a state of total collapse if reports are to be believed.

Shortly after this conference I received an e-mail from a young man. He took his elderly mother to a public hospital recently – he didn't say which one. His mother was apparently comatose and barely breathing. When he arrived with her in his car he asked for help getting her into casualty – this was not forthcoming. When he finally managed to get her into casualty he was met with complete indifference by nursing staff, who, far from triaging his mother, were more concerned about whether or

not he had completed the paper work that was required to have his mother seen at the hospital. He found a doctor – and got much the same response. In spite of the fact that his mother was *in extremis* he was told that she would have to wait her turn.

Finally, in total frustration and anger, he managed to find the CEO of the hospital – presumably the medical superintendent. His mother is apparently still alive – not well, but she didn't die as a result of this neglect. He asks why, when he pays his taxes, his mother should suffer such appalling lack of care. And he has every right to ask this. He also said that he realises that it was only because he felt in a position to fight that his mother is alive today. This young man works at Nedbank – he is educated and articulate.

Kgosi says that we are no longer a caring society. Unfortunately he is correct. Are we speaking for the poor? Generally – and I include myself here – the answer is no. We moan about paying our medical-aid

payments and we use private health care, because we couldn't possibly go to a public hospital. Our politicians use private health care. Indeed, some of them go out of the country for medical treatment.

How can we speak for the poor? According to Kgosi the answer is simple – use public health services and complain. It is only if people like us – with voices – start to use these services and complain about the state that they are in, that public health in this country will recover. I am sure he is correct. Do I have the courage to drop my medical aid and rely on the public health system? I am not sure – I certainly know that I couldn't get the treatment I rely on for asthma through the day hospitals. And I wouldn't subject my elderly father to the public health system at this stage of his life. But this has certainly made me think. The poor have no voice – they require us to speak for them. Do we have the courage to do this?

Once again we are looking for doctors' drawings, paintings, or photographs for the cover of *CME* in 2009. Please contact the editor if you have anything available.

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