

Editor's comment

Blaming the poor



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This issue of *CME* carries a letter written by Dr Saadiq Kariem, CEO of Groote Schuur Hospital, in response to my editorial of January this year in which I outlined in some detail the process that a good friend of the family had to go through in the public health system. I am grateful to Dr Kariem for taking the time to respond to me and to outline the problems that are experienced by people trying, against the odds, to deliver health care to the broad mass of our population.

We have a new Minister of Health and a new government. So far our new president and his spokespeople have been heavy on the need for delivery. We even have a new ministry set up specifically to monitor government actions – I presume to make sure that delivery is happening. As a middle-aged, white South African I must admit that I was among those who were negative about the prospect of Jacob Zuma as our president, but I am now, like many around me, willing to give him a chance. So far, the emphasis on delivery has been heartening. I would like to see it happen and I would appeal particularly to our new Minister of Health to revive our ailing public health system so that the people

who are striving to deliver health care to our population are once again able to do so.

Where am I going with this, you may ask? When I received Dr Kariem's letter, I sent it to several people because I was so impressed. One of these people was my mother, who lives in Scotland. This led to an e-mail discussion about 'the poor'. 'The poor', my somewhat *verkrampie* mother responded, are generally rather squalid and dirty themselves – the implication being that they really can expect no better when they go to a public hospital. I responded that this may be her experience in Scotland, but that this is not my experience here, where people who live in shacks arrive at work clean and neat and tidy. Well maybe, she responded, but the areas they live in are extremely squalid and dirty – is this not so? I must admit that I have left the argument there because if I continue it, things will only end acrimoniously – you know what mothers are like, I am sure!

But what I am getting at is that she is blaming the poor – which is becoming an increasingly common attitude in this materialistic world of ours. Of course, the response is that poor areas are squalid

because they lack service delivery. I know that in Masiphumelele (close to where I live) the rubbish is hardly ever collected. I also know, from my experience in my very upmarket neighbourhood, that all it takes for squalor to start is for our rubbish not to be collected on one day because of a glitch in the system. Everyone drives past the overflowing wheelie bins in their luxury cars, waiting for 'someone else' to clean up.

So, if we blame the poor for their plight are we likely to care enough to deliver the services they need, health being one of the most important when other services such as water-borne sewage and rubbish collection are neglected? Unfortunately, the answer is no. As our government has become increasingly middle class, so I suspect have they taken on the attitude that the poor are somehow to blame for their lack of services. I have said in previous editorials that the poor need us to help them to have a voice. They do not 'deserve' squalid conditions in the public hospitals that they have to go to. This is a public call to Dr Aaron Motsoaledi to turn our public health services around and make them into something that we can, once again, be proud of.

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