

# EDITOR'S COMMENT

## Continuing woes



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As 2006 draws to a close, South Africa is in the news again. And the news isn't good. Our ever-controversial health minister, dubbed Dr Beetroot, has once again made us a laughing stock with her continuing insistence that a combination of garlic, beetroot, olive oil and lemon juice is the best way to combat HIV and AIDS. The South African stand at the Toronto World AIDS Conference added antiretrovirals as an afterthought, although the afterthought suggestion was denied by our health officials. Our government's approach to the crisis that faces our country was referred to by Steven Lewis, the UN Special Advisor on AIDS, as showing us to be part of a 'lunatic fringe' in the way that we tackle HIV and AIDS. And our health ministry continues to insist that we have the best response to HIV in the world. It would be laughable if it were not so serious.

The TAC are now, along with several other sectors of civil society and a few Nobel laureates, engaged in a campaign to force Dr Beetroot to resign. With the appalling lack of accountability that is apparent in our government, I doubt that they will have much success – even in the face of international calls for her resignation.

But it is not just in HIV that she is failing. Recent reports in the *Mail and Guardian* show a health care system that is seriously failing our population. The report took in several hospitals around the country and was horrifying. There are few doctors and fewer nurses. Infrastructure is crumbling. Wards are overcrowded and dirty. Equipment is out of date or non-existent. Even the basics like bedding, crockery and cutlery are in scarce supply. And let's not even get onto drugs.

There were a few shining examples of individual entrepreneurial spirit. There is the medical superintendent (from Pakistan) at Kimberley Hospital who is paying off junior doctors' student loans in return for 3 - 4 years of service. It's working. Then there is the nursing administrator at Eben Dönges Hospital in Worcester who has filled the need for nursing staff from the unemployed in the local community. But these examples shine out sharply in an otherwise deeply depressing picture of decay and lack of interest.

Our Minister of Health does not have her eye on the ball. She is preoccupied with pushing her own agenda around unproven HIV cures. She tacitly approves the quackery of Matthias Rath and company, and breaks South African law by suggesting that questionable traditional medicines can treat HIV, with no properly conducted clinical trials to back up her claims.

But the worst is her neglect of the health of the majority of her people. This is unforgivable. Few people in South Africa can afford private health care. Those who rely on the public health services are being badly let down. There is no political will to care for our sick – and our population are ailing. Poverty, disease and general neglect by the self-serving group who occupy Parliament are taking their toll. We have one of the worst set of health statistics in Africa – and these statistics are getting worse.

Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang must resign – before too many more die of neglect.

CME is published monthly by the South African Medical Association Health and Medical Publishing Group

Private Bag X1, Pinelands, 7430  
(Incorporated Association not for gain. Reg. No. 05/00136/08).

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