

Do the poor matter to the ANC?

COMMENT

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Politicians threaten and ostracise 'Bara' staff who pointed out shortcomings in the hospital's service delivery

THE African National Congress (ANC) doesn't seem to care about ordinary people. One of the biggest lies of our times portrays the ruling party not only as the liberator of yesteryear but a steadfast social services provider to the struggling masses of today. All it takes to expose the government's empty promises over the last 15 years, though, is a glimpse at the country's public health facilities.

After looking at South Africa's ailing health-care system recently, international television channel Al Jazeera English has shown a powerful documentary series, *Saving Soweto*, to the world. Its distressing images are of writhing patients with red emergency stickers on their foreheads awaiting the attention of embattled staff at Chris Hani-Baragwanath, known as Bara, a vast hospital serving 4-million people.

Nothing new about that, you might say. Indeed, I researched a film for the BBC on the same subject nearly 20 years ago. Called *Welcome to Hell*, to the annoyance of Bara's apartheid bosses it showed exactly the same health care crisis. The difference is that *Saving Soweto* focuses on health professionals doing their jobs with total dedication in appalling circumstances that have not improved one iota under the ANC's rule.

"The situation was dreadful, deplorable, despicable, disgusting through the apartheid years," one long-serving doctor tells the camera. "And to my sadness, it certainly hasn't improved."

Heroic doctors of several nationalities as well as South Africans speak of impossible workloads and chronic under-funding. "When it gets busy we have about a third of the amount of space we need," said one. "There's not enough staff, there's not enough nurses, not enough doctors. A lot of the equipment doesn't work or breaks when you need it ... It's only ten o'clock in the morning and already we have used up all our ventilators."

A medic describes the stress of eight doctors treating 150 daily admissions in her ward. Rampant HIV/Aids problems have engulfed Bara, says another: "The ARV roll-out happened far too late because of the maverick view of people in government and (health) administration." A professor in the once-respected teaching hospital says: "I have an ICU that has 36 beds for a 3 000-bed



Newborn, healthy babies lie in a cardboard box in the maternity ward at Chris Hani-Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto, Johannesburg.

PICTURE: JENNIFER BRUCE

hospital. It feels like you are playing God sometimes."

Doctors talk among themselves about the effects of South Africa's uncontrolled and seemingly unstoppable crime rates; a society with the world's highest incidence of femicide in which women have a better chance of being raped than learning how to read, and 3 in 10 pregnant women have HIV.

Screened repeatedly all over the globe, talented local director Lisa Henry and her US-trained partner Shareen Anderson's eight-part, haunting portrait of suffering humanity and courageous professionalism

in a hopelessly under-resourced hospital may well hasten the collapse of South Africa's international reputation in the post-Mandela era.

What the documentaries do not show, however, is the shameful pressure applied in their wake to Bara's outspoken doctors by arrogant public health officials.

Embarrassed, perhaps, and clearly angered by the gory record of its own neglect, Gauteng Health issued a terse memo threatening to dismiss medical staff who talked to the media. Although the films were obviously made with the permission

of Bara's in-house administrators, possibly with a view to attracting the attention of South Africa's uncaring leaders, the ANC's response to *Saving Soweto* was not to deal with the sad catastrophe that is Bara, but to muzzle the doctors and nurses who are trying so valiantly to help its patients.

What we see in the Al Jazeera documentaries is, of course, Thabo Mbeki's legacy (which includes the major buildings extensions currently underway at Bara). Jacob Zuma's lot, who claim to care about the poor, have a new health minister in Barbara Hogan, who may be planning to address the dire daily situation at Bara. If she wants to distance her administration from Manto Tshabalala-Msimang's - assuming Jacob Zuma is concerned about Al Jazeera's shocking public health revelations themselves as opposed to the damage they inflict on a government he will soon lead - now is the time for the ANC to display its heart instead of its fist.

Mbeki was president of only half the country ... the rich half. He and his ridiculous health minister felt free to betray ordinary South Africans when they most needed help - in sickness. But Zuma will be president of the other half of the country as well. His supporters are entitled to assurances that Gauteng Health's attitude to the plight of Bara's patients as well as its courageous doctors is going to change, not stay as cold-blooded as it was on Mbeki's watch and, for that matter, under apartheid.

Gauteng Health's response to a televised wake-up call ought to worry the ANC. It suggests a defensive, bullying instinct in official ranks where concern and compassion would better serve the people of Soweto. I remember being told by the BBC after the screening of *Welcome to Hell* that hundreds of viewers in the UK had phoned in with offers of money and support for Bara's beleaguered patients. Among the callers was a senior member of the ANC, who vowed that his organisation would prioritise health care in general and Bara's grave problems in particular.

Soweto's patients were the ANC's mothers and grandmothers, brothers and sisters, the emotional politician told the London producer. Their suffering is our suffering, he declared in the days when it was fashionable for the ANC to say such promising things.