

SOUTH AFRICAN COMMITTEES OF HEALTH SCIENCES DEANS

4 December 2023

MEDIA STATEMENT

The impact of budget cuts on health professions education in South Africa

The South African Committees of Dental Deans (SACODD), Healthcare Sciences Deans (SACOHSD) and Medical Deans (SACOMD) are associations of the country's Deans formed to facilitate the collective interaction of the Deans with other stakeholders in the country on academic matters related to health sciences education, research, and the health system.

Recent events in our country as reflected in a range of articles¹ has brought into sharp focus the challenges facing the health system in South Africa. The Deans are deeply concerned

¹ <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-11-02-medical-day-zero-catastrophic-budget-cuts-endanger-western-cape-three-academic-hospitals/>

<https://health-e.org.za/2023/09/15/access-to-health-services-a-major-concern-as-treasury-mulls-budget-cuts/>

<https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2023-10-16-services-may-need-to-be-rationed-western-cape-health-department-expects-budget-cuts/>

<https://mediadon.co.za/2023/05/10/nehawu-statement-on-the-health-budget-vote-for-the-financial-year-2023-24/>

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-06-25-national-health-insurance-is-a-big-fat-empty-promise-experts/>

<https://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/national%20budget/2023/ene/Vote%2018%20Health.pdf>

<https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/budget-cuts-will-have-dire-consequences-for-health-sector-union-warns/>

<https://www.gov.za/speeches/minister-joe-phaahla-health-dept-budget-vote-202324-11-may-2023-0000>

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-10-27-more-austerity-in-public-health-is-the-wrong-medicine/>

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-11-02-eastern-cape-warns-of-drastic-budget-slashing-to-meet-national-government-targets/>

about the impact of the financial crisis and the budget cuts recently announced by the National Treasury.

On 31 August 2023, the National Treasury issued a letter to national departments and provincial treasuries, advising accounting officers and accounting authorities on specific measures required to achieve savings and prevent materialisation of potentially crippling resource constraints in the latter part of the 2023/2024 financial year. Budget cuts emanating from this Treasury announcement will most certainly impact on the South African health system and does not create an enabling and supportive environment for the eventual realisation of a health system based on the concept of Universal Health Coverage. In an already overburdened health system struggling to cope with the health demands of our communities and with existing evidence of staff burnout, the staff morale is likely to worsen because of the lack of financial support to the practice, increased stress and feelings of helplessness.

The Deans of Dental, Healthcare Sciences and Medical faculties across the country remain committed to partnering with the National Ministry of Health, the Provincial Departments of Health, the National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS), the Department of Higher Education and Training, and engaging civil society organisations and other stakeholders to ensure that our health system delivers accessible and good quality care to all citizens. Graduating high quality health professionals and ensuring that all South African healthcare graduates are absorbed into the country's health system will significantly contribute to the quality of care provided.

The impact of the systemic failures in our health system, among other matters, include:

- (i) Compromised patients and communities where the quality of care does not meet the required standards of care.
- (ii) Disproportionately impacting on the health and wellbeing of women and children especially in rural areas and so worsening gender inequity in the country; and
- (iii) Inadequate training platforms and clinical staff to produce high quality health professional education and training.

The Deans have grave concerns about the future of the academic health platforms across the country inclusive of the NHLS because of the chronic underfunding of health infrastructure and professional education and training. The absence of a national integrated and comprehensive health system plan, poor human resource planning, and poor governance and management of the health system continue to destabilise these academic health platforms. Despite multiple interventions on the part of the Minister of Health and the National Department of Health, it is the view of the Deans that the health system in South Africa

remains in crisis. The recent decision of the National Treasury and the resultant budget cuts for the health sector will further exacerbate the health system crisis.

The Deans are calling on Government to take drastic steps to address the systemic failures as a matter of priority. An optimal health system in South Africa is a prerequisite for well-functioning academic health platforms to train and graduate quality health professionals at undergraduate and postgraduate level (including at specialist and sub-specialist levels).

The constant failure to adequately fund internship and community service placements for graduating health professionals represents a serious human resources challenge. The Deans believe that the National Government has a duty to ensure that all South African students and those with permanent residence status should be placed in fully funded posts as this is a legal requirement for practice in the country. It is the Committees' view that Government must consistently make funding available so that all eligible students graduating from our universities are guaranteed funded placements in the South African health system. Government must also similarly commit to find the funding to place all South African students who graduated from the Mandela-Castro Medical Collaboration from 2019 onwards in Internship and Community Service posts.

The Deans call on the Minister of Health, in consultation with the Minister of Higher Education and Training, to urgently:

1. Finalise the discussions with the National Treasury so that the commitment is realised to 'protect' the health sector from any of the austerity measures and budget cuts. The constitutional right to health care for all in the country must not be compromised.
2. Convene a meeting with representatives of the Deans Committees to address matters of implementation with respect to the filling of posts and employment of health workers to bolster the provision of good quality health care in the provinces. The healthcare workforce remains a critical driver of the provision of good quality health care as well as being a critical driver of inclusive economic growth and a means of addressing gender inequity in the health workforce.
3. Ensure that by 31 December 2023 the National Health Forum is reconvened to facilitate discussions that will enable the health and higher education and training sector to jointly plan the short-, medium- and long-term future of health services and health professions education and training. The establishment of a joint workforce planning process will also ensure that funding can be made available for guaranteed allocation in Internship and Community Service posts across the health professions.

The Deans are fully committed to the realisation of an effective health system based on the concept of Universal Health Coverage providing high quality care to all South Africans. We call

on civil society to join us in playing our role to ensure that all South Africans have access to quality health care.

We wish the Ministry well with their endeavours during these trying times for our country.

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