

Taking stock



The doctors' strike was a cry for help.

It was a desperate attempt to bring reason to an absurd situation – absurd because of the lack of investment in the health care system.

There had been protracted negotiations about salary structures, but these were disregarded and twisted announcements were made. The government grossly under-estimated other wage settlements and unilaterally climbed down on assurances.

People became disillusioned and angry – angry that our political masters were not to be trusted, angry that the desperately needed investment in those delivering the care was not going to be forthcoming (never mind the abysmal state of primary care, the lack of resources and medication, the broken equipment and the creaking infrastructure).

This anger and frustration of doctors spilled over into action that put their jobs on the line. They were prepared to go to jail for their beliefs, just as in the dark days of the previous government, a government that also would not listen to reason.

Regrettably, the response of the authorities was ominously heavy-handed. Instead of leadership, we had retreats into legal confrontation – suspensions, firings and recriminations. We seem to learn slowly.

Ex-President Mbeki brooked no criticism and removed from office those who thought differently to him – even members of his own political persuasion. His Minister of Health could not stand any opposition to views that did not match her own – even if hers were naïve and flew in the face of medical science. Did we not learn from the Nationalist government debacle that there is a better way of doing things? Have we not succeeded in moving from confrontation and condemnation to reasoned negotiation?

In a civilised society, it is possible to respect another person's view without agreeing with that view. It is possible to be a good person, a sane, well-meaning person, and nevertheless hold views and beliefs that differ from those of one's masters. It is entirely possible to have a group of dedicated doctors who want to serve their patients but are not given the tools to do so, and they should be given the courtesy of a reasoned hearing.

Let us hope that a bargaining chamber that takes doctors' views into account will prevail. Let us hope that adversarial attitudes between local government and the academic institutions are replaced with listening and working together in the best interests of our patients.

Those who have suffered and sacrificed so much to live in a true democracy deserve to have their health given priority, and that depends on collaboration, not confrontation.

The women of South Africa deserve a far better deal as far as the services provided by the state are concerned. From contraception and fertility aspirations through to proper obstetric and gynaecological care, we must keep seeking ways of persuading those who have been voted into power of the needs of our women patients. Many of the services provided – or not provided – were highlighted by the strike.

We say to the authorities: Visit a primary care centre and see what the conditions there are like!

Reconsider your investment in your greatest asset, which is the health care workers in your employ.

Be a government of the people – take stock and invest in the people of South Africa!

Athol Kent

Editor