

## SASOP STATEMENT ON ADVOCACY ABOUT CONDITIONS AT TOWER HOSPITAL, FORT BEAUFORT, EASTERN CAPE

Reports about problems with patient care at Tower Psychiatric Hospital, in Fort Beaufort in the Eastern Cape, appeared in the media during the past week, where a psychiatrist and SASOP member was identified as the whistleblower about conditions at the hospital. While the SASOP has, since the Life Esidimeni experience in Gauteng, encouraged its members to be actively involved in advocacy for patient rights and acceptable standards and service delivery conditions, such whistle blowers must also be supported and protected. At the same time, members are also advised on having accurate information available and following the correct procedures of reporting - first internally and then externally.

Dr Kiran Sukeri, the psychiatrist involved, reported several matters that seemingly have been infringing the human rights of mental health care users at Tower Hospital over an extended period of time, as well being indicative of entrenched management and governance problems at the hospital. These included a poor standard of food and clothing, unlawful seclusion of patients, as well as inaccurate figures on deaths occurring at the hospital.

The South African Society of Psychiatrists (SASOP), represented by the SASOP President, SASOP Eastern Cape Subgroup Chair and Public Sector Group Representative, representatives of Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and the South African Federation of Mental Health (SAFMH) met with the management of Tower Hospital on the 6th March 2018 to explore the grounds and context of the issues raised. The SASOP and other advocacy representatives are currently drafting a report on the findings of the visit. In addition, an investigative task team has been appointed by the Eastern Cape Department of Health, while the relevant Mental Health Review Board will also be requested to investigate the matter. SASOP will await the findings of the task team to determine any further action that may be required.

The SASOP has initiated and maintained sustained efforts to raise problems and concerns about mental health care in the Eastern Cape over several years. Since July 2017, the following measures have been undertaken by the SASOP:

- Meeting with Eastern Cape MEC of Health and senior officials of her department on 7 November 2017, following SASOP's previous media statement on 28th June 2017, on the state of mental health service in South Africa and calling for urgent action and a complete overhaul of the mental health care system.
- Submissions in November 2017 to the SA Human Rights Commission by both the SASOP Board and by the SASOP National Public Sector Convenor
- Follow-up communication in December 2017 with the National Department of Health on concerns about Forensic Psychiatry in the Eastern Cape
- Advising in February 2018 on reports about Tower Hospital to be submitted to the National Minister of Health, the South African Human Rights Commission and the Office of Health Standards Compliance.

The SASOP wants to reiterate the importance of the correct and responsible reporting on poor and unacceptable standards and practices of care in all services and facilities, while the rights, safety and continued employment of state employed whistle blowers and other health advocates must be ensured.

SASOP BOARD