

IT'S TIME FOR MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS TO BE ADVOCATES

In the aftermath of the Life Esidimeni tragedy and concerns raised of possible human rights violations at The Tower Hospital in the Eastern Cape, The South African Society of Psychiatrists (SASOP) voices the need for medical and health professionals to be advocates without being criticized or threatened if they do.

Professor Bernard Janse van Rensburg, President of SASOP, says that although medical and health professionals have an ethical duty and responsibility to act in the best interests of their patients, the so called 'whistle blowers' are often criticized and harassed.

"The reality of advocacy has resulted in some arguing that professionals as salaried government employees do not have the authority to engage in advocacy and should rather adhere to the principle of the Public Service Act not to criticize employee policies and practice in the public domain. Yet, this same legislation expects from health care providers to put the public interest first in the execution of their duties."

"Medical professionals are at front lines of health care delivery and witness daily the direct impact of irregularly on the lives of patients. Clinicians should use the mandate according to the Protected Disclosures Act (Act 26 of 2000) as amended in 2017 (Act 5 of 2017), to speak out when patients' human rights are violated, report incidents of malpractice, fraud, corruption, misadministration and management of facilities as well as lack of patient care and or neglect."

"Reporting on such wrong-doing promotes individual responsibility and organizational accountability however if left silent the clinician enables and contributes to a culture of impropriety."

Prof Janse van Rensburg says as a body SASOP serves its members, the discipline of psychiatry as well as the community and as a result had to develop the capacity and process as an advocate in itself to engage with several stakeholders and partners in speaking out, as well as investigating and eradicating incidents that threaten the lives of many.

“It’s challenging for individuals to voice their concerns without being ostracized and therefore we are empowering professionals by providing training on the systems in place for approaching the matter of health advocacy, how to report concerns and raise concern internally using the correct channels.”

To enable the awareness on advocacy SASOP has partnered with the Rural Health Action Project (RHAP) to assist the society in training its members across the country on advocacy and considerations of legal and professional contexts in which different clinicians are working such as psychiatrists, occupational therapists, nurses and psychologists.

The RHAP VOICE Project has been implemented across four provinces so far and assists health care professionals in understanding the legal foundation of advocacy as well as raising concerns on whistle blowing to improve standards using internal and external resources and channels available and the associated ‘protection’ available to them.

Prof Janse van Rensburg says that it’s comforting to know that at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels the Health Professionals Council of SA (HPCSA) as well as faculties of Health Sciences across the country, have all embraced the “CanMEDs” principles of medical education, which includes advocacy.

“For example the WITS Faculty of Health Sciences have adopted a formal course in health advocacy for undergraduate health sciences students, while the College of Psychiatrists amongst other of the Colleges of Medicine of South Africa has also adopted advocacy as one of the seven core competencies that post graduate candidates need in order to qualify as specialists. If we can start a culture of speaking-out from the outset, our health care practitioners and professionals will be better equipped and more confident in realising their vital role in advocacy.”