

Get to know Gauteng Health MEC Dr Bandile Masuku – The Citizen 30 May 2019

14

Masuku takes over from MEC Dr Gwen Ramokgopa, who was brought in after the Life Esidimeni tragedy in 2016.

The recently appointed Gauteng Member of the Executive Committee (MEC) for Health Dr Bandile Masuku has a mammoth task ahead of him as he plans to win back the confidence of the province's residents and the department's entire staff complement.

Masuku, along with the rest of the province's executive team, were sworn in Parktown on Thursday.

Gauteng has the largest health system among all provinces which services the highest number of people. Masuku told *Health-e News* that improving the experience of patients at public health facilities is his top priority. "[Patient experience] relates to waiting times in terms of [how long] you queue before you're seen by a doctor, waiting to get medicine and treatment, and also in terms of waiting for surgical procedures."

He believes the confidence and happiness of health workers are integral in ensuring that patients are given the best level of care. Masuku said the staff morale in all clinics and hospitals — and in the department — is very low. Tackling the staff shortages in health facilities and resolving the issue of salaries are at the top of his to-do list.

"We want the department to be patient-centred and it must be led by physicians and clinicians. Working with community organisations becomes important for us to change the system," he explained. "The department's responsibility is to give a platform for health workers and patients in order to improve and change its fortunes."

Happy workers mean happy patients

Masuku said his experience of working in the public sector makes him the right person for the job. Gauteng Premier David Makhura agrees. He said the African National Congress (ANC) has spent years grooming Masuku for this position, and that he and the party have confidence in him.

"This is the biggest healthcare system in Southern Africa and we've taken time to train Masuku into this role. Masuku's task is big, but I trust he'll succeed. He's specifically trained for his portfolio because he's a doctor. Other MECs are not confined to their portfolios [as he is]," Makhura said during a media briefing at the swearing-in ceremony of the province's MECs.

Before his appointment, Masuku was the Head of the Obstetrics and Gynaecology unit at the Thelle Mohoerane Regional Hospital, in Vosloorus. He previously worked at Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital, Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital and Pholosong Hospital.

"I come from the system, so I know that the staff aren't happy because they're overworked, not paid properly and generally fatigued. We need to get that right and make sure that we're able to improve. If we don't have happy soldiers, we won't be able to win the battle," he said.

Masuku takes over from MEC Dr Gwen Ramokgopa, who was brought in after the Life Esidimeni tragedy in 2016, where 144 psychiatric patients died after the health department transferred them

from Life Esidimeni facilities to unlicensed non-governmental organisations during the embattled former health MEC Qedani Mahlangu's tenure.

"We cannot have another Life Esidimeni," Makura said. "We have very clear priorities that we must deliver on. We want to fix the Gauteng healthcare system. The people of our province want us to deliver quality healthcare for all."

Bridging the gap

Masuku, who served on the ANC's National Health Insurance (NHI) Task Team in 2005 and 2006, said Gauteng will be the bedrock of the NHI because of how large the health system is.

"Gauteng is basically like a national health system because we service all provinces and it's essentially a health system that can actually service the country. The NHI bill will be important in trying to bridge the gap [between the national and provincial health departments] because the past 25 years has shown that there are policy gaps," he said.

He added that the gaps that exist in all facets of government — even provincially and on the local government level — need to be addressed in order to achieve a united health service.

While Masuku agrees that there is a shortage of hospitals in the province, he believes Gauteng should first make sure that its current health facilities are running efficiently and the infrastructure is maintained.

"The clinics we've built are quite small because when we built them we didn't have the anticipation of the increase in the number of people that will be serviced by those clinics. The goal now is to make sure that we get all our health facilities at the right standard; only then we can talk about new hospitals," he explained.