

### *Trying to cure a sick health system - one dead patient at a time*

THE government wants South Africans to support the National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme, and those questioning its feasibility have been accused of being elitist and not wanting to share resources with the public sector. In the minds of our very sensitive politicians, there is no distinction between questioning and opposing. In light of the shambles in some provincial health departments, we are right to ask, "How will they make the NHI work?" I cannot fathom why any decent person would oppose endeavours to provide healthcare for all. It is a no-brainer. But the way in which the public health system is being run does not inspire confidence. In fact, the thought of placing my wellbeing in the hands of a system that is beset with mismanagement, corruption and wasteful expenditure frightens me. How did the biggest hospital in the southern hemisphere, Chris Hani Baragwanath, run out of essential life-saving drugs? Even the most basic drugs, like Panado, are hard to come by. We learnt with horror that several newborn babies had died, while others had been left brain-damaged in Bara's labour ward because of a staffing crisis linked to, among others, the non-payment of nursing agencies. Instead of taking responsibility for this mess, CEO Johanna More responded by blaming doctors and asking: "Where were they when the babies were dying?" I am not sure how doctors and nurses are responsible for ensuring a reliable drug supply and laboratory services, or even paying nursing agencies for that matter. Had it not been for the same doctors whom, she says, are the villains, there would not have been an urgent meeting to sort out this crisis. The medical professionals working at the three academic hospitals wrote a desperate letter to the provincial authorities asking them to intervene. The CEO is in denial. When avoidable stillbirths were reported, prompting Health Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi to dispatch five defence force theatre nurses to Bara, More denied there was a problem. Think back to last year's crisis when doctors complained that they had to rely on two ancient and broken CT scanners to service the hospital. She responded by saying: "They are talking rubbish." That problem was solved after the intervention of the Health Department. Where did they find such an unrefined and crass leader who does not even have the decency to address staff with respect? Bara is not the only hospital experiencing this depression. Professor Ashraf Coovadia, a paediatric specialist at Rahima Moosa Mother and Child Hospital, says drug shortages grew chronic towards the middle of last year, but the final straw was last week, when the pharmacy ran out of treatment for bacterial meningitis, a potentially fatal condition. Several hospitals and clinics are reported to have no gloves or bottles to collect TB sputum. Debts owed to the National Health Laboratory Service are escalating and causing an operational crisis in the health system's ability to process diagnostic tests, including tests related to HIV and TB. The service is now operating on a shoestring budget, which cannot be sustained. Suppliers of medical technology are also buckling under this pressure of mounting debts. Some are small businesses that have had to shut down or lay off staff. So much for entrepreneurship and job creation. I am one of those South Africans lucky enough to afford medical aid, and every time my contribution goes up, I moan and complain. I resent the fact that basic healthcare is so expensive, but in the absence of any viable option, my medical aid stays. The poor were promised free healthcare; instead, they are at the mercy of an uncaring system. Everyone I know speaks well of Dr Motsoaledi. They say his commitment and dedication is unparalleled. But he must know that his crusade against the high cost of private healthcare is completely misplaced. The people he needs to wag his finger at are the administrators, the policymakers and politicians who have no heart; those who have forgotten where they come from and have become superior and deaf to the cries of the suffering. The spin doctors have been hard at work assuring us that the "matter" will be resolved. I am sure it will be - one dead patient at a time.