

So many questions

The public healthcare system in the Eastern Cape is in crisis. Chris Barron asked national Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi:

You've said the problem is not money. What is it?

My impression is that it's about management at various levels within the provincial government. They can't do the job? It's hard for me to tell at a distance. But it has always been like that in the Eastern Cape. It's like that with the education department, and many departments have been under administration. It can't be that the Eastern Cape has been underfunded ever since 1994. For instance, the non-payment of doctors. That's about management.

What can you do to intervene?

There's management in the Eastern Cape, there's a premier, there's government. As a Department of Health I can only do what I find possible to do.

What is that?

First of all I need to find out what the problem is.

Haven't you already done this?

I am saying I'm going to find out.

This situation hasn't happened overnight, has it?

Problems within the provincial department of health have been there for a long time, it is true. Not only in the Eastern Cape. There was a report by the auditor-general in 2009. Since that report we have put up a team of chief financial officers, headed by the national CFO, to resolve these problems. So it is not that we've been folding our arms. If the Eastern Cape has failed in spite of that, then that's why I'm saying it's a problem of management.

Can you do anything about it?

As I am saying, I am not governing the Eastern Cape. It depends on government laws, it depends on what the premier wants. And, finally, it depends on what cabinet decides. The cabinet can decide on things like Section 100 as they did in Limpopo. We have not yet arrived at the conclusion that such a step is needed.

Reports have described the situation there as a crisis?

We've heard these anecdotal reports ...

You don't think it has reached that point yet?

These are anecdotal reports. Government does not act on the basis of anecdotes. I've approached the minister of finance asking that he gives up a team of financial experts, and I

will give up a team from the Department of Health, so that they together can go there and find out exactly what is happening.

What about the testimony of heads of department at major hospitals in Port Elizabeth where they say elective surgery is no longer possible?

I heard about that yesterday. Nobody told me anything about it. Neither the doctors nor the province approached me about that.

They say they've tried to get your department to intervene for some time?

I'm not sure about that. They never spoke to me.

Several years ago a report by former Minister Barbara Hogan highlighted lack of accountability as the fundamental problem. Do you agree?

Several weaknesses were raised.

Do you think accountability is a fundamental problem?

I think there are many factors. Accountability might be one of them. That is why we will have an office of health standards compliance so that everybody will have to account in a legally structured manner for whatever they've done.

Would you agree there is little accountability at the moment?

I'm not sure what you mean by that.

Some R800-million was lost through corruption in the Eastern Cape health department last financial year. Has anyone been held accountable?

That's a question you can ask the premier. I don't see how R800-million can disappear without being investigated.

The Special Investigation Unit found that R800-million did disappear.

Then surely somebody must be arrested.

Can National Health Insurance be built on a collapsing health system?

It can't. The first precondition is that the quality of healthcare in the public health service has to dramatically improve.

Chris Barron: The Sunday Times, 8 July 2012