

Specialists pan plans for proton therapy facility

CANCER specialists have poured cold water on the National Research Foundation's (NRF's) ambitions to expand its proton therapy cancer treatment capacity at iThemba Labs in Faure, saying it is too costly and in the wrong place. The laboratory boasts the only proton therapy facility in the southern hemisphere, which is used for treating very small tumours in delicate areas such as the brain, spine and eye, because it causes relatively little damage to healthy tissue. The tumour-destroying beam is generated in a cyclotron. Hydrogen atoms are stripped of their electrons, leaving protons that are accelerated and focused on their target with an electromagnetic field. However, iThemba's cyclotron is also used to produce radioisotopes and for scientific research, leaving it available for proton therapy for cancer patients for only two days a week, four months of the year. Last week, officials from iThemba Labs and the NRF made their case to Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi for a proposed R1,2bn investment to build a dedicated proton therapy facility at the Faure site, which lies in a sparsely populated area between Cape Town and Stellenbosch. The Minister was briefed privately then toured the facility. He told journalists he was impressed by its capabilities. The government needed to plan for the growing burden of non-communicable diseases, including cancer, he said. Department of Health deputy director-general for strategic health programmes Yogan Pillay said Motsoaledi and Science and Technology Minister Naledi Pandor were considering submitting a joint memorandum to the Cabinet motivating for funds to improve SA's proton therapy capacity. Providing iThemba Labs with another cyclotron was one option, but it might also be possible to build a proton therapy unit in another part of SA, he said. Amo Jordaan, an executive member of the South African Society of Clinical and Radiation Oncology (Sascro), said proton therapy was costly and of limited use. Sascro, which includes representatives from all of SA's medical schools, would not support the establishment of a new proton therapy unit, he said. Jordaan said there were cheaper alternatives capable of treating a wider range of tumours, such as Addington Hospital's linear accelerator, which targeted tumours with photon beams. Raymond Abratt, head of radiation oncology at the University of Cape Town and Groote Schuur Hospital said the Faure site was the wrong place for a proton therapy unit. It should be adjacent to a major hospital, as proton therapy was mainly used for children. He said children required multidisciplinary care, including physiotherapy, occupational therapy and nutritionists so it would be completely inappropriate to build it at iThemba. Few studies have directly compared patients treated with proton therapy to those treated by other methods, so it is unclear to what extent it prolongs lives, an article in the British Medical Journal said earlier this year after the UK announced plans to spend £250m on new proton therapy facilities.

Tamar Kahn: Business Day, 9 July 2012