

## *Long wait to cut queues*

THE amount of time it took to build the Natalspruit and Zola/Jabulani hospitals in Gauteng - over six years - is a tragedy in a province that is battling with inadequate capacity. The two hospitals have yet to open, though construction has been completed. Gauteng health MEC Hope Papo expects the installation of equipment and staffing to be completed by the end of August but no date has been set for the opening. The earliest possible date is October. The delays were due to a number of factors, including contracts that were cancelled, redesigns and contractors stalling on construction because they were not being paid. The delays have caused huge budget overruns. Costs for the 300-bed Zola/Jabulani hospital in Soweto have more than doubled from R334m to about R700m; for the 760-bed new Natalspruit facility in Vosloorus they have escalated by R600m to R1,7bn. Gauteng infrastructure development MEC Qedani Mahlangu says she has drawn several lessons from these projects. Her department, which undertakes infrastructure development for all the departments in the province, had to rely heavily on external consultants to scope the work, because only 20 percent of her workforce were engineers and technicians. Since September 2012 she has recruited over 300 technical staff and engineers. However, she has not yet built up her project management division. Ideally she would like to have a manager for each project. She says that co-ordination between her department and its client departments has improved. One sign is the speed at which her department has been able to carry out projects in recent months. Mahlangu says from now deviations from original plans, one of the main causes of cost escalations, will be considered only if the instruction comes from the head of the client department. Her two main clients are the province's departments of health and education. She believes her department now has capacity to build a hospital in 12 months. No more hospitals are planned in Gauteng at present, however.

Health infrastructure is one of government's priorities as it aims to revamp hospitals and clinics ahead of the implementation of National Health Insurance. Progress has been slow because some provincial health departments have been unable to spend money and others have been riddled with corruption. Mahlangu has yet to find a solution to cash flow problems, the cause for suppliers not being paid on time. Complicating things is that while the National Department of Public Works gets funding directly from the treasury for its projects, its provincial counterparts have to claim from their client departments, which creates delays in payment. One of the reasons the new Gauteng hospitals have not yet opened is that they are still recruiting staff. There is a small pool of healthcare professionals in SA relative to the population, a problem that is being addressed through the building of new medical schools.

Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi says various ways will have to be explored to expedite the building of a new academic hospital in Polokwane as a teaching facility for a new medical school to be established at the University of Limpopo in 2015, now that the university's link with the Medical University of Southern Africa (Medunsa) is being severed. Limpopo's public works department, which must carry out the job, is

under national administration. Motsoaledi says the new medical school is one of the many steps SA needs to take to build capacity. Not a single medical school has been built since the advent of democracy in 1994. The last one was in Transkei, then nominally independent, and it was built 28 years ago in Mthatha at the University of Transkei, now Walter Sisulu University. Motsoaledi says this means SA has limited capacity to train enough doctors to meet the needs of its growing population.

"He says SA has 51m people, but only has eight medical schools [graduating 1 200 doctors a year]. A ninth school is needed. The new school will start by offering the MBChB degree and expand into various others. It comes as the former Medunsa parts ways with the University of Limpopo. Medunsa, based in Garankuwa (Pretoria), merged with the University of the North in 2005 to form the University of Limpopo, but Higher Education & Training Minister Blade Nzimande has since decided to separate them because the merger hasn't worked. He is due to gazette in mid-November the establishment of a new health sciences university in Garankuwa, which will incorporate Medunsa. Though these initiatives will help improve the numbers, they won't result in big changes. SA has about 39 500 registered medical practitioners, though some may not be practising. Specialists are even scarcer - five per 10 000 people; Brazil and Russia have 17 and 43 specialists per 10 000 respectively. Conservative estimates say about 12 500 more doctors are urgently needed in SA. That means the country would need to double the number of graduates it is producing annually. SA universities are also battling with having to train nurses after several nursing colleges were neglected and subsequently closed. One of the measures Motsoaledi believes will help boost the numbers is the SA-Cuba doctor training partnership. SA has been sending students to study medicine in Cuba since 1996. Currently there are about 1 300 SA students in Cuba studying to become doctors. However, the numbers will not change much until SA has developed its own adequate training capacity. Motsoaledi says his next step is to lobby for the establishment of medical schools at the universities that are due to open in Nelspruit and Kimberley. At the same time, government is refurbishing a number of nursing colleges to take the pressure off the universities. The country has about 124 000 qualified nurses and midwives, about 45 percent of them above the age of 50. The Health Department's HR strategy says up to 512 000 nurses will have to be produced over the next decade to replace those retiring and leaving the profession to sustain the current ratio. But the country produces only 3 200 professional nurses a year.

*Andile Makholwa: Financial Mail, 16 August 2013*