

Comment: Corruption is killing us

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THE grand-scale theft of government funds is undermining the Health Department's ability to deliver and undermining any chances of achieving equity. We all need to act to stop it. Theft from state-owned enterprises and dodgy government tenders is estimated to run to over R100-billion - about 8.5 percent of government spending - according to former Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan. He said this is enough to double all state grants. It is also enough to pay for treatment for HIV and tuberculosis for a year. Thanks to whistleblowers and tenacious investigative journalists, we get daily reports of the extent of state capture of our economy and politics by a mafia intent only on enriching itself. Yet this grand-scale theft comes at a time when our country is in a recession. The lucky minority that have jobs are in danger of losing them every day.

Posts frozen

National and provincial departments are struggling. Last year, R30-billion less tax was collected because fewer people are earning and there is less spending. Government departments have been told to cut R10-billion in spending and many departments report it is impossible to hire frontline staff, including doctors and nurses, because posts have been frozen. Provinces owe the National Health Laboratory Services (NHLS) millions of rands. The NHLS, which processes all the tests that enable doctors in the public sector to diagnose patients, will run out of money by November if these bills are not settled. The last oncologist in Durban left public health earlier this year, and the province also faces massive shortages of radiotherapy equipment.

The SA Medical Association (Sama) in KwaZulu-Natal reports that critical posts have been frozen. Sama KwaZulu-Natal coastal branch chairperson Dr Mvuyisi Mzukwa reported earlier this year that there was a "total collapse" in the departments of oncology, urology and in the ear, nose and throat section in eThekweni, the biggest district. There is also a shortage of critical equipment and buildings are in disrepair. Even money for school feeding schemes in this province has been subverted into the pockets of the crooked, according to reports. Government recently published a White Paper that paves the way for the introduction of a National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme. This is supposed to make access to health services more equitable. Yet, the recent history of state-owned enterprises shows that they have become cash cows for the corrupt. Where are the guarantees that the proposed NHI Fund will not suffer the same fate? Corruption is killing our health system, and thus, killing us. Every one of us needs to do whatever we can to fight back and stop the looting.

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