

DA calls for public health inquiry

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The party has asked Cyril Ramaphosa to set up a judicial commission to get to the bottom of challenges crippling the country's system

The DA has called on President Cyril Ramaphosa to establish a judicial commission of inquiry into the state of public healthcare, after its random survey of hospitals and clinics revealed significant gaps in patient care.

Chronic understaffing, equipment shortages and long waiting times characterised many of the facilities the DA visited. Its observations tally with the problems highlighted by provincial health MECs in presentations to Parliament this week, which revealed that even the tightly managed Western Cape health department was struggling to cope with demand.

“Public health facilities are no longer places of healing. They have become death traps for the poor, who have no other options available to them,” said DA spokeswoman Refiloe Nt'sekhe.

“While inspecting the RK Khan Hospital in KwaZulu-Natal, we learnt that waiting times for CT [computed tomography] scans are three months, while the next available mammogram appointment is in 2019.”

Emergency medical personnel in Mpumalanga told the DA that they were using their own money to buy vital equipment such as blood pressure monitors, while in the Northern Cape staff at Kimberley Hospital complained about a lack of basic supplies such as toilet paper.

The DA's Gauteng health spokesman Jack Bloom acknowledged achievements such as the roll-out of HIV and tuberculosis treatments, but said many patients were being short-changed. “There are pockets of excellence in Gauteng where staff are doing their best and patients get top-rate care. But the problem is the waiting times: you can wait five years for hip surgery at [Chris Hani] Baragwanath,” he told Business Day.

Gauteng had excellent academic hospitals, which attracted patients beyond its borders, increasing pressure on a stretched service. The DA had written to Ramaphosa requesting a judicial commission of inquiry as it would have the scope and power to get to the bottom of the mismanagement and corruption plaguing public health, Bloom said.

The DA said its plan for universal healthcare offered patients a better deal than the government's proposed National Health Insurance (NHI).

Published in 2016, the plan promises universal healthcare quicker and cheaper than NHI.

It proposes scrapping medical aid tax credits and using the money to improve public healthcare and subsidise medical scheme membership for more people.

“Our health plan is the most practical approach to universal healthcare as it aims to keep what should be kept, fix what should be fixed and smartly extend services that should be extended within the limits of the national purse,” said Nt'shekhe.

Meanwhile, the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union is planning mass action in Limpopo after the province's health department failed to pay staff R160m in performance bonuses for 2016-17.

The union's Limpopo spokesman, Jacob Adams, said the department had offered to pay R90m. “We told them to go to Treasury [and ask for more].”

kahnt@businesslive.co.za