

We need strong and courageous leadership to overcome pandemic

By Siviwe Gwarube MP – DA Shadow Minister of Health

Chairperson,

While we receive the grimmest daily news about the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in the country and the death of thousands of South Africans, it is important that we never lose sight of what is possible.

South Africa can overcome this pandemic and form part of a group of countries who achieved the near impossible.

We are able to save lives by implementing key interventions that will arrest the free fall that has started to happen in many parts of the country.

It is not too late to augment provincial health systems in order to bolster their health response to this crisis.

It would be a mistake to throw our hands in the air and wait for the storm to ravage us further.

There are pockets of excellence in our health system that we can turn to as our refuge during these times.

However, if we are to choose that path, we must do so immediately as the window of opportunity is closing very quickly.

If we are to choose to prioritise saving lives over internal party politics, then the time to do so is now.

The country's health system inadequacies are not insurmountable.

However, they do require strong and decisive leadership.

They do require agility and speed.

They require an honest reflection on the past 4 months under one of the longest lockdowns we have seen in the world.

Our challenges require us accept and deal with the fact that the past two-and-a-half decades of gross mismanagement and corruption by this government have compromised the health system and render it almost useless in the face of a global crisis.

They require an admission that despite the commitment to build health system capacity across the country, provincial health departments, under the leadership of the Health Minister, have failed to do so.

Government must acknowledge that it did not build the requisite critical-care bed capacity that would be needed or capacitate facilities with oxygen cylinders.

It never fill critical posts and dealt with staff shortages; capacitated the national health laboratory service to rollout mass testing; or secured a steady supply of PPE and ensured that systems were set up to prevent the kind of theft we have seen in the provinces thus far.

Once that admission is made and accountability is taken, urgent action must be taken to rectify the situation across the country to save lives.

Simply put, the following must be provided:

1. **Field hospitals** in key hotspots in the country must be completed - at all costs - in the next coming days. The Eastern Cape still has only one functioning field hospital which was donated to the provincial department. There are areas like Alfred Nzo which do not have a single critical care bed for hundreds of kilometres. The Nasrec facility has, through donations, been able to function in part as a field hospital but must have its capacity extended immediately to ease the burden on Gauteng facilities.
2. The **national database of bed capacity and availability** must be fully functional immediately. This guides healthcare workers in referring patients to where they are able to be assisted and aids members of this house in holding this government to account.
3. All **critical posts** must be filled. Extra staffing capacity must be developed. It cannot be that ICUs are operating at a fraction of the number of staff needed.
4. Place the **Eastern Cape under administration** as per section 100 of the Constitution. Recently, Health Minister Zweli Mkhize has stated to me that the crisis unfolding in the Eastern Cape does not require an intervention provided for by the Constitution. Just yesterday, we learnt that this province has not kept an accurate record of fatalities and reported over 400 deaths in one 24-hour period- a massive distortion of what is happening on the ground. Minister Mkhize keeps arguing that all provinces have required assistance at one point or another. This kind of denialism is what will cost thousands their lives. The Eastern Cape's health system has all but collapsed. Weekly visits to the province will do nothing to rectify this. Strict national management of the province is needed.
5. **Emulating the Western Cape** model where it is applicable in other parts of the country. The Minister would do well to stop vilifying the Western Cape and begin to emulate parts of the health system approach to deal with the crisis in other parts of the country. The Western Cape experienced the pandemic curve first; they began to institute some strong measures to deal with the gaps in the health system and have successfully managed to bring the number of daily infections down. That is something that must be celebrated and emulated. Key actors in the

province can be seconded to other parts of the country to save lives. We cannot allow narrow political jostling hamper life-saving measures.

If these measures are implemented without any further delay, we will see a dramatic improvement to the country's response to the pandemic.

In times like this, strong and courageous leadership is needed.

That is the kind that will put aside political considerations for the sake of saving lives.

The question is whether Minister Mkhize will rise to the occasion or not.