Democratic Alliance speech by

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DA Gauteng Shadow MEC for Health

Gauteng Health budget is like pouring money into a leaking bucket

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Madam Speaker, this is the 29th Health budget that I have spoken on.

I wish I could say that I have any confidence that the R59.4 billion will be efficiently and effectively spent.

Every year there are the same dreary reports of corruption, irregularities and wasted spending.

For the entire period of this past year, there was an acting Head of Department and an acting Chief Financial Officer.

Only now have these positions been filled, and it remains to be seen what difference it will make.

I remember when previous Health MECs speculated that the health budget would be adequate if it was properly spent in the key areas.

A former CEO of one of the academic hospitals spent time at the department’s head office and then left for the private health sector.

He said to me that he couldn’t understand how so little was achieved with such a large budget.

Amos Masondo was the first Health MEC, and he promised more than 20 years ago to implement a computerised health information system.

This system will not only vastly assist patient administration by cutting long queues, but it would also tell you where money is best spent to achieve the most impact.

Former Health MEC Brian Hlongwa is now facing trial for corruption related to the R1.4 billion tender for a health information and electronic health records system which could have been implemented 12 years ago.

Just imagine what a difference this would have made in saving lives and alleviating suffering.

Now, after all these years, the department is promising yet again to implement a health information system.

I really hope they get it right this time, but we will have to see.

The assassination of health official Babita Deokaran last year shows that the corruption networks are still alive in this department.

Every hospital seems to have a racket going on to buy goods from friends at inflated prices.

And there are still too many incompetent officials in key positions everywhere.

In this situation, as we saw with the billions of rands allocated to combat the Covid epidemic, it’s like pouring water into a leaking bucket.

The leaks are everywhere. If it’s not stealing, then it’s downright incompetence.

How else to explain the feeding frenzy over the PPE money?

Or the R500 million spent on the Anglo Ashanti ghost hospital in the far west rand?

Or the R200 million on extra wards at Kopanong hospital which are still not completed and need to be repurposed for something else?

And the same for many other projects, including the fiasco in repairing the Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Hospital, which was so badly handled that it has now been handed over to the National Health Department.

I visited the casualty department at Charlotte Maxeke yesterday - I remember it previously as a very busy place but there were hardly any patients because it is still not fully open.

Conversely, the crowded conditions at the Helen Joseph Hospital are utterly deplorable.

Here is a complaint that was sent to me by a visitor who went to drop off food for a patient at this hospital. She says she was physically sick when she left because of what she saw which she describes as follows:

“There were about 80-100 patients lying on the urine-soaked floors.

They were begging me for food and blankets. An animal would not be treated this badly.

The one lady was screaming as her rapist was sitting five steps away from her.

People are screaming and begging for help, especially in the Psych ward.

There is blood, bandages, and a putrid smell everywhere. It is a health hazard itself.”

Down the road from this hospital is the Rahima Moosa Mother and Child Hospital where the CEO decided at one stage that she didn’t have to be physically at the hospital, but she could work from home.

A paediatrician at this hospital by the name of Dr Tim De Maayer penned an open letter this week to health department heads.

He asks pointedly:

“How do you manage to come to work every day, fail at your job of ensuring basic healthcare for the people you serve and still sleep at night.”

I hope that the Honourable MEC has read the entire letter, but I will read parts of it.

Dr de Maayer concludes:

“Having worked in the public sector for 21 years, I can tell you frankly: things are falling apart.

If your healthcare workers are the centre of providing care, we cannot hold. Things are going backwards, fast. The care that is being provided in your less than glittering hospitals is getting worse every day.

Are you worried about the greedy lawyers who are waiting in the wings, suing your department for millions because a premature infant went blind because there was no functional meter (which costs less than R1,000) monitoring her oxygen delivery?

You should be because money is being wasted on paying negligence lawsuit compensations rather than preventing the problem in the first place.

And before you ask, yes, these issues have been raised with management repeatedly, including two reports on the critical state of the neonatal wards and obstetric services in 2016 and 2021, and a more recent letter on 11 April 2022 detailing the disastrous state of the hospital.”

Madam Speaker, this is a devastating letter written out of despair by a doctor who is risking his job by speaking out in this way.

There are many other medical staff who feel the same way.

I want to say upfront that I feel very sorry for MEC Mokgethi. She was appointed in very difficult circumstances and inherited a severely dysfunctional department.

The Honourable MEC is always respectful in answering questions and responds directly to anything that I send her, and I appreciate this.

Nevertheless, Honourable MEC, the buck stops with you, and I request that you respond directly to this open letter written from the heart by a caring health practitioner.

I suggest you start today by acknowledging that there is indeed a health crisis, and nor merely “pressures” as you have said in a recent interview.

Madam MEC, are you prepared to admit that there is a crisis, and if not, why not?

I am not going to go into the specific reasons why the DA will be rejecting this budget as we have done in previous years. You can refer to all my previous budget speeches – all 28 of them – as nothing much has changed over the years.

The Auditor-General will also this year make his usual devastating comments on maladministration.

Let me repeat the prime problem – the money in this budget is being poured into a leaking bucket.

Madam MEC, your job is to plug these leaks, and even change the bucket, so that the budget funds a re-engineered health system that delivers quality care for everyone.

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