

The Progressive Health Forum (PHF), together with the South African Medical Association (SAMA), the SA Private Practitioners Forum (SAPPF) and the IPA Foundation of SA (IPAF) affirm the call by President Ramaphosa to unite in a national response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Having due regard for the existing crisis in the health sector, we remain concerned at the ability of the health services to respond to the pandemic. There are disquieting signs of a public health system response to Covid-19 that is unevenly and, in many cases, poorly managed. The private health sector has, similarly, responded to sporadic calls for support in the absence of a nationally co-ordinated healthcare platform to effectively manage the pandemic.

First, provincial and national health officials appear to be developing responses on the hoof, creating confusion, dysfunction and danger at the clinical level. Local managers, many of whom appear out of their depth, exacerbate the problem through their indifference or ignorance. Staff are exposed to poor institutional management, compromising the safety of patients and staff alike.

The relegation of the need to ensure the safety and protection of health workers treating Covid-19 patients to an excuse-laden PPE procurement programme is also a clear and present danger to frontline medical personnel.

We remind CEO's and managers of health institutions that they bear direct responsibility for the safety of frontline staff and they will be held to account should their failure to procure adequate PPE result in medical personnel being infected.

Second, lockdown regulations seem to have allowed callow and ignorant officials to arrogate to themselves powers they do not have under the regulations and to spurn science and medical ethics, thereby undermining the integrity of health professionals everywhere.

The capricious behaviour of the Limpopo MEC for Health, which has led to the unethical, irresponsible and, in all likelihood, illegal detention of two doctors, is a case in point. That she is a medical doctor herself and, therefore, beholden to her professional oath, seems to have escaped her in the flush of her clearly misunderstood new powers. She, her enablers and her minions fail to grasp that this sort of behaviour is inimical to a democratic state.

Third, international best practice of early testing, for which the Minister of Health has correctly made a clarion call, has not been matched by the preparedness of the lead agency for testing and contact tracing, the National Health Laboratory Service (NHLS). Despite having ample warning that the pandemic would inevitably reach our shores, the NHLS has only now started optimising its operations. Worse still, a failure in the timely procurement of appropriate testing kits has sparked a proliferation of private entities and interests peddling dubious testing kits.

At a time when the President and the Minister of Health have commanded the respect of the nation and have received wide acclaim for their leadership, these actions undermine their firm response to the pandemic.

We call on the President and the Minister of Health to issue an executive directive that prioritises PPE for all frontline staff, making it a dismissible offence for managers who fail in this critical task.

We further demand their direct political intervention to rescind the Limpopo government's irrational detention of medical professionals and to put on notice any politician or official who behaves in this manner.

Early testing at scale under scientific direction is the pivot on which the entire national response rests. We call on the MoH to act decisively to end any board and management dysfunction at the NHLS so that this vital work proceeds.

Health workers and clinicians here, like their counterparts around the world, have put their lives on the line in this global public health emergency. The least they should expect from the government is an extraordinary level of support, even if that means showing incapable politicians and officials the door. In this time of national crisis, anything less is unacceptable.

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PROGRESSIVE HEALTH FORUM (PHF)

SOUTH AFRICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION (SAMA)

SOUTH AFRICAN PRIVATE PRACTITIONERS FORUM (SAPPF)

IPA FOUNDATION OF SOUTH AFRICA

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