

KZN Health MEC urges young people to speak about problems; comforts relative of late Cuba-trained student who allegedly committed suicide

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KZN Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo has urged students studying in Cuba – and young people in the province in general – to speak out when they have problems. This, he says, can help them find solutions and make what may appear to be big problems suddenly seen surmountable.

MEC Dhlomo was speaking at Grey's Hospital in Pietermaritzburg today, during the memorial service of a 22 year-old medical student who is alleged to have committed suicide in Cuba on 15 August 2017.

Sandiso Siyabonga "Makhehla" Mkhize, originally from Mpendle, was in the third year of his medical studies in Cuba when he allegedly took his own life. At the memorial service, he was described as a friendly, hard-working young man with a love for football and a penchant for bringing cheer to others through his jokes. The memorial service took place amid a sombre atmosphere, with Mkhize's relatives and fellow Cuba-based South African medical students (who are back home for the holidays) visibly overcome with grief. They wept openly when a slide show with Mkhize's photographs was played on a big screen inside the hall.

MEC Dhlomo recalled how Health Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi had failed to hold back his own tears in 2013, when bidding farewell to the students ahead of their trip to Cuba – due to the poignancy and significance of Government's act of sending students from poor families overseas to become doctors. Mkhize was one part of that group.

Little did we know at that time that some of you would not be coming back

, recalled MEC Dhlomo. *We were expecting a lot from this young man. He was extremely valuable. You know, in the healthcare system, we have people who are 75 and 80 years old who are still contributing. This means that Sandiso after completing his studies would have given more than 50 years of service to to his country as a Doctor.*

MEC Dhlomo acknowledged that studying medicine can be stressful – even more when doing it in a foreign country. He urged the students to continue working hard, but also ensure that if challenges arise, they speak out by informing the Department through existing channels. They may also identify someone that they can confide in.

If you encounter challenges while you are there and need to take decisions, please do contact us. This is a country to country agreement. If there's anything you wish to discuss, we are here for you. We want you to be protected there. Stay inside the hostel. Remember that being in Cuba is temporary, you will eventually come back home.

We want to urge you to help each other in carrying the load. We all have limited capacity to handle difficult situations. Talk among yourselves and find ways to solve problems and share the load. We want to see you coming back as doctors.



The late Sandiso Mkhize



MEC Dhlomo comforts the bereaved family of Sandiso Mkhize

Ms Zamasishi Madlala, who spoke on behalf of the Mkhize family, thanked the Department for giving her cousin an opportunity to study. She expressed gratitude for the assistance rendered to the family.

As a family, we are deeply affected by what has happened. But we do not blame God for it, because each and every one of us has their own time. We had hoped that Sandiso would come back and help us to prosper like other families. But it was not meant to be.

To other families whose children will also get this opportunity to study in Cuba, please ensure that they use this opportunity. What has happened to us doesn't mean it will happen to your children as well.

We thank the Cubans and the South African government for training our children, so that they can come back and help their families and communities. We appreciate all the help we have received, and the help we will be receiving.

MEC Dhlomo said that Cuban authorities are investigating the alleged suicide. It is expected that Mkhize's mortal remains will be repatriated in the middle of next week, which will be followed by his burial.