

KZN Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo sets the record straight on lack of transformation and training opportunities for black Africans in academia; says the need for change is urgent

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When he launched the People's Manifesto in Durban more than a week ago, our Honourable President Mr Cyril Ramaphosa reiterated the African National Congress's historic mission and key objective, which is to build a united and democratic South Africa that is non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous.

Further unpacked, this mission and objective is about uplifting the quality of life of all South Africans, but especially the poor. Crucially, it also extends to the urgent need to liberate Africans in particular and Black people in general from political and economic bondage.

As a country, the ultimate yardstick with which the success of our Struggle for emancipation should be gauged is the extent to which we have touched the lives of Blacks in general and Africans in particular. In the ANC, we have also set ourselves a quota of 50 percent representation of women in key management and leadership positions, which we are obliged and committed to turning into a reality.

To understand the depth of the problem, one need not look further than the Dr Nelson Mandela School of Medicine at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. For decades, the university has failed to reflect through the development and promotion of Black African academics that it is actually situated in a province and country whose vast majority is Black and African.

If an alien from outer space landed on these shores and did a survey of the representation of Black Africans at senior management level at this university - and many others - they'd be forgiven for thinking they are in a country whose majority of citizens is anything but Black African. It just cannot be.

Given these realities that have persisted well into the New South Africa, and our painful past of racial oppression and exclusion, it becomes difficult to understand the hullabaloo that some ill-informed political opportunists have sought to create around the recruitment of registrars in KZN. By prioritising Black Africans in our quests to train doctors to become specialists, we are leveling playing field. We are making our country normal.

The need for the stratification of recruitment processes according to race, gender and disability, among other determinants, must always be viewed within the historical context of racial exclusion and other forms of unfair labour practices in South Africa – and the impact that this has had particularly for Black African, Indian, and Coloured communities.

Due to entrenched systems and endemic opposition to transformation, this racial exclusion, which was rooted in Apartheid legislation – itself declared a crime against humanity – continues to be felt to this day.

While it may not be palatable for some to admit the truth, the fact is that the shameful apartheid system succeeded in ensuring that Black people are consigned to an inferior quality of healthcare. But it didn't end there; it also meant that if you were not White, chances of pursuing a career as a doctor were virtually non-existent due to a variety of factors.

The apartheid regime promulgated the Extension of University Education Act 45 of 1959, which limited the universities that Black South Africans could enter. This law was enforced from 1959 to 1984. During this period, the only avenue that was created for Africans to study medicine was

MEDUNSA, the Medical University of Southern Africa. As a result, by 1985, 83 percent of all doctors and 94 percent of all specialists were white.

Today, when you consider the racial demographics make-up of this province, it becomes clear that the ramifications of the legacy of Apartheid have not subsided.

Addressing these imbalances is therefore not only an imperative legislative mandate of government that must be fulfilled, but it is also the morally and socially right thing to do. To this end, it is incumbent on us as a Black African majority country to put in place mechanisms to ensure adequate representation of Blacks in general, and Africans in particular, in all key areas of leadership and governance.

Lack of transformation has kept us from meeting our targets at post-graduate level, which has meant we have failed to recruit enough Black African students as registrars to be trained as specialists. Although there are departments such as gynaecology and obstetrics; and paediatrics, where we are doing reasonably well in this regard, there are still other departments who remain a preserve of any race group other than African. In those Departments, it is still regarded as a taboo to admit an African as a registrar. As a result, you do not have enough registrars who are available to qualify as consultants. Therefore, we must do what's right and enforce these quotas.

At undergraduate level, as the KZN Department of Health we've done well to enforce a high quota for Black Africans in the recruitment of medical students at UKZN. These are the students who, when they complete, will have no qualms about coming back and going to work in Nongoma, Ixopo, Phongolo, Umsinga or KwaMagwaza.

When we get trained as medical professionals, we do not say that "my people" are only those who reside around Durban, or any other metropolis, and that's it. As medical professionals, we have an ethical obligation to serve the public regardless of their race, culture, economic status or geographical location.

This is precisely why Government's massive investment in the training of doctors in Cuba is so crucial. It has begun to progressively inject into our system a cohort of students who know deep down in their hearts that they owe it to the impoverished communities to come back and be of service to them. This will ultimately have a profound impact on access to quality healthcare service for our people.

Until then, our society remains an unequal society with limited opportunities for self-development for those who were historically oppressed. We still have a long way to go in the creation of a country, economy and job market that is inclusive, and free from unfair discrimination, that we can all be proud of.

We therefore should be unapologetic about redressing the imbalances of the past. We call upon all right-thinking South Africans who are committed to equitable sharing of this country's resources to do the same.