

SPEECH DELIVERED BY THE MEC FOR HEALTH, DR ZWELI MKHIZE, ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AWARDS FUNCTION AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION CENTER IN DURBAN ON AUGUST 13 2004.

It is hard to believe that we have been in this department for ten years already. It seems like only yesterday that we were at the threshold of a new dawn for our country and our province. We were faced with a mammoth challenge of amalgamating different departments and ensuring that health services are accessible to all. The task of undoing decades of injustice and inequity was daunting. We needed more than just resolve and optimism to go forward with courage.

We faced the task of bringing together staff and components from the previous administrations and building one department that would work towards a common goal. It has been a long and arduous journey. Today we stand together to say for the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health the past decade has been one of solid delivery. We have served the people of this province with pride, compassion and professionalism.

Together we have battled many storms and still prevailed. From cholera to malaria to the onslaught of the greener pastures of other countries that are slowly but surely eroding our already overstretched capacity, we have stood together and have refused to falter. We have embarked on extensive transformation and capacity building programmes to ensure that our staff has the morale and skills to tackle the new challenges with confidence.

Together we have extended health services to previously neglected areas, built more clinics, community health centres and hospitals. We have bravely fought death, diseases and ignorance. We have given the people of this province information that enables them to take charge of the health and to prevent disease.

Today we say thank you to all our friends, colleagues, partners, stakeholders and the entire family of the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health for standing with us through the years. We are grateful to those of you who have stayed with the department through the years and through the tribulations of working for the largest health department in the country and yet one whose funding does not match the extent of the challenges it faces.

Our staff is the backbone of service delivery. It is for this reason that we are gathered here today to say to them “thank you for your hard work and selflessness”. Thank you for helping to ensure that for KwaZulu-Natal the decade of freedom also means freedom from disease. Without our staff our department does not exist. Today I know I speak for all the people of our province -- especially those who have no recourse to private healthcare -- when I say we can never thank you enough. We hope you will be with us for much longer.

We are aware of how overstretched you all are, particularly at institutions. The onslaught of HIV/Aids is adding a heavy burden on all of you. It is for this reason that we have instituted the chaplaincy programme to help take care of the spiritual needs of our staff who have to deal with the sick and the dying daily.

We hope today we can all revel in the achievements of our department over the past decade. They are a result of the efforts of everyone in the department. In the day-to-day routine of doing our jobs and caring for the sick, we do not realize that at many times we are indeed performing miracles – patiently, quietly and consistently. From the nurses who traverse the most inhospitable routes of our province in mobile clinics, to community health workers who go door to door preaching the gospel of good health, our staff makes a tangible difference in the lives of the most needy members of our society. Today we say we know the lengths you go to play the role you have carved for yourself, and we say thank you, ningadinwa nangomuso.

We not only recognize and appreciate the role played by present members of staff, but we appreciate the role played even by those employees who have retired and those who have moved on to other departments and organizations. They too played a role in shaping this department and we cannot forget their contribution.

Sadly, not all of those who started this journey with us are still with us. Even as we rejoice today over what we have achieved, we dare not forget them. We have lost some of them through the most tragic circumstances. The loss to their families extends to the entire department. Very soon we hope to hold a prayer day will also be dedicated to their memory. Although they are no longer with us, they are part of our legacy and of our family.
Siyabakhumbula.

There is a special group of staff that we recognize and applaud today – those employees who have been with the department for 40 years or longer. This group personifies the loyalty to the department that we speak about. A heartfelt thank you to all of them for their dedication to this department.

And then of course we recognise those staff members who have excelled in various categories of awards countrywide. They are truly the stars of the department and an inspiration to their colleagues. Congratulations to all of you.

August is women's month in our country. It is a month that we all use to salute, honour and to give special acknowledgement to South African women for the role they have played and continue to play in shaping our country. This acknowledgement of women has a special resonance for us as the health department. Women are in the majority in our department and they add their special touch to how we care for our patients. From our nurses, doctors and paramedics, to general assistants, administration staff and managers, we say to all the women in the department we recognise and are grateful for your contribution in caring for the people of our province.

We have come a long way in ensuring that our service are accessible to all in the province, but there is much that remains to be done. If this term of office is to have any meaning for me we have to change the way we do some of the things we do. At the top of my priority list is client satisfaction and adopting a human rights based approach to how we work. We should never lose sight of what our primary business is, that is, "CARING" in every sense of the word. Patients should leave our institutions feeling like they have been

treated as people, not merely as patients. They should leave feeling that their rights as human beings have been respected and re-affirmed.

In line with this, from next year we will be instituting awards between hospitals and districts to recognise those who go beyond the call of duty to make patients feel welcome, respected and special. Institutions and districts will be competing in these awards in various categories, in addition to the current sport and music competitions that the department runs. (Incidentally, the department held its provincial netball tournament yesterday and I am told that the eThekweni region walked home with the trophies.) While competing among ourselves for the new awards next year, we will continue to participate in programmes and projects that are aligned to national and provincial awards and competitions.

In closing, friends and colleagues, I would like to appeal to all our staff members to take care of themselves. I have already alluded to the acute shortage of staff we face, but even apart from this if we ourselves are not well, how can we care possibly care of others? The nature of the work our staff does takes its toll on them and I want to appeal to all of them to make use of programmes and services that will ensure that they remain fit, healthy and strong. I make a special call to women in particular to take the time this month to care for their own health needs. The good health of our province relies on the good health of healthcare workers.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much.