As nature takes its course….

Joggie Hattingh, President: SAAHIP

I left my office on the afternoon of 6 June as a happy puppy! I was almost halfway through the period during which I was acting as Director for my district and it has been, unlike the past episodes, plain sailing. I was aware of the odd fires in our district, but everything was under control.

When I arrived at the office that Wednesday morning everything was in turmoil, staff approached me with, “Did you see this on Facebook??” and “Did you read that on Facebook??” The storm has struck in such a way that I was taken by total surprise. We had no communications. The fire damaged the Telkom lines as well as the cell phone towers. Eden district and Central Karoo were cut off and we had no idea what the situation in our sub-districts was. The only communication that was functional (but with very unreliable information) was Facebook!!! Then we found that one of the smaller cell phone networks was operational and we could establish contact with Knysna and with our Chief Director’s office.

We immediately joined the rest of the Emergency Response Team in the Joint Operations Committee (JOC) and what an experience!!! Never have I seen such decisive and effective management of what seemed to be an unmanageable situation.

But I want to actually talk about our staff at the coalface (this time – literally!).

Our sub-district management team, nurses and doctors, with the pharmacy staff and the admin staff, all joined hands to ensure that patients were safe in the first instance. During the crisis, all private hospitals gave their full support and took in patients that needed care, but back to our staff…

 Whilst their own houses were threatened by the fires, they looked after their patients and their colleagues! I cannot begin to describe the devastation caused by the fires in Knysna and Plettenberg Bay, neither the loss of property nor the loss of nature’s beautiful forests. Quite a few of our hospital staff lost their homes; other had their homes damaged by fire and by smoke, yet patients were cared for. When medicines were needed, our pharmacy staff braved the smoke that filled the hospital and the pharmacy, to retrieve what was needed. At this stage the hospital was evacuated due to severe smoke, but was never damaged by fire.

When it came to receiving help and aid, our staff who did not lose all, refused help and referred all help to those who had lost more than they had. The same was seen in the community!

I cannot begin to say how proud I am of our colleagues (pharmacists, doctors, nurses, admin staff, etc. etc.) who gave their all for their fellow men. This of course includes the staff from the private hospitals, who opened their doors to our patients and to our staff during this crisis and who willingly worked the extra hours this brought along, whilst in the exact same situation with the fires raging around town.

When I look at the scale of the disaster and how it was managed, including the fact that total loss of life due to the disaster was seven persons (we all agree that it is seven too many!) and when comparing the situation to similar events in America, Austria and recently Portugal, we should all stand still and salute our emergency services. They were brave, they were prepared and resolute and they stood up to the best in the world!

With that, I salute the people of this country. From all over help was offered, goods and food… finance and assistance, you name it and it was either offered or sent. In a time when everybody’s motives and integrity is questioned, we were shown that as a people, we still care for each other and are willing to go to extreme lengths to offer relief to those who suffer.