

SAAHIP's reaction to disrupted service delivery in North West province

The North West province of South Africa experienced ongoing protests, many of them violent, during April and May 2018. Healthcare services, including supply of medicines, were seriously disrupted.

As more and more reports of the problems experienced were received, SAAHIP issued two media releases. It also offered to assist in arranging state medicine deliveries to private sector facilities that, unlike the medicine depots, were not being made inaccessible by strike action.

As a result of the media releases, the chairperson of the North West branch of SAAHIP, Yvette Joubert, was invited to appear on the SABC 2 Health Talk television show.

Media release #1 – Pharmacists concerned about the lack of medicines in North West province

The South African Association of Hospital and Institutional Pharmacists (SAAHIP) and its members have expressed strong condemnation of the effects of the ongoing protest action in the North West province. The strike has resulted in major disruption of the supply of medicines. It is understood that the grievances of the protesters must be addressed, but the action cannot be condoned when the lives, health and wellbeing of residents are compromised.

Reports that unqualified workers are employed at some medicine-depots are also concerning, as this contravenes pharmacy legislation and poses a risk to patients.

Closure of healthcare facilities due to unavailability of medicines and medical supplies from provincial depots can result in devastating consequences for patients. Not only is death a possibility in some cases, but patients who have been stabilised on chronic medicines risk having inadequate control of their ongoing medical condition, while patients needing medicines for acute conditions face the possibility of not receiving medicines at all.

Pharmacists have reported that staff who are unable to assist patients are feeling demoralised, knowing that those who feel the impact are people who are both poor and helpless. One pharmacist told SAAHIP that it's psychological torture to send a patient home without anti-retroviral medicine.

The Pharmaceutical Society of South Africa joins with its hospital sector, SAAHIP, in expressions of support for both patients and pharmacists who have been placed in this untenable situation.

"We appreciate the reports that the Minister of Health has been engaging with stakeholders to try to find immediate solutions," says Refiloe Mogale, president of SAAHIP. "If medicines and medical supplies cannot be delivered to the depot, it is appropriate to negotiate

emergency delivery to private sector facilities from which the clinics and hospitals can collect their supplies."

Concern has been expressed however that the action may be too late to implement smoothly at this stage.

"It confirms our belief that a national disaster management plan for the delivery of medicines and medical supplies should be developed, so that in emergencies such as this, immediate and effective action can take place," she concluded.

Media release #2 – Effects of the strike on medicine supply at public sector facilities

The South African Association of Hospital and Institutional Pharmacists (SAAHIP) continues to monitor with great concern the effect that the current strike action in the North West province is having on the lives of patients who desperately need medicine from public sector facilities.

The morale of all staff members in the health sector is low. Doctors cannot treat patients and pharmacists are at the front line, needing to face the patient's wrath, disappointment and fears. "We feel the anxiety building in the community as we inform them of the situation, with close to no resolution or alternative options for most of them," says one pharmacist who cannot be named. "We also have to face the medical officers who cannot render a quality service."

Pharmacists in a particular out-patient department have been collecting data over the past few days and the results are devastating. Only 36% of all the patients served at the department received between 76-100% of their prescribed medication, while 64% of all patients served received less than 75% of their prescribed medicines. Some patients left the facility without receiving any of the medicines prescribed.

The medicines out of stock range from simple but essential paracetamol for pain to complex medicines for diabetes and heart conditions. Even prenatal supplements like folic acid, calcium and iron are unavailable. Folic acid is of vital importance for unborn babies, as it prevents neural tube defects. Some patients can buy it from a private pharmacy, but patients expect it to be available at antenatal clinics. Without iron and calcium an increase in pregnancy complications such as anaemia and pre-eclampsia can be anticipated. With methyl dopa, which is used for hypertension, also running low, pregnant women are now in a high risk category. These patients sit in the normal queue at the pharmacy, only to be told (sometimes after 2 hours) that the stock is unavailable.

Buying medicines in the private sector is not an option for most of the patients.

A member of the public asked a pharmacist an unanswerable question. His father had suffered a heart attack and needed a specific medicine which was unavailable. There is no alternative to that medicine, and it

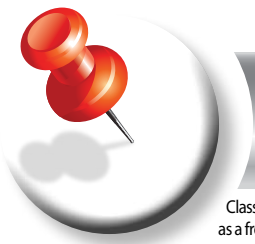
is too expensive to be bought privately. The son asked the pharmacist, "What is the use of saving his life when you cannot assist in preventing it from happening again?"

Reaction of the Department of Health to SAAHIP's offer of help

A number of media releases expressed thanks to SAAHIP for its offer. The following paragraph is taken from a media release from the North West Health Department:

"The Department also commends the support of the South African Association of Hospitals and Institutional Pharmacists (SAAHIP) who are planning to use their network of private hospitals to collect and distribute medical supplies. They have requested a list of critical items and the quantities required. The plan for the Department is to then collect the items in a private facility per district where the province or district will source the items."

As it happened, the violent protest action diminished, and it was unnecessary for alternative arrangements to be made.



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