

MEDIA STATEMENT

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HEALTH DEPARTMENT RESPONDS TO PUBLIC STATEMENTS ABOUT FORCED ISOLATION OF TWO DOCTORS WHO TESTED POSITIVE OF COVID-19

The Limpopo Department of Health has noted with utter concern and dismay that a leader of a reputable organisation such as the South African Medical Association can resort to utilising an open letter to address an issue with the department even before consulting the department for its side of the story. The department also believes it is too malicious for Angelique Coetzee, Chairperson of SAMA to reduce an important departmental issue and make it about the person of the MEC. What the chairperson of SAMA fails to appreciate is that such drastic decisions such as the one they are complaining about is a product of a collective decision making process of the Limpopo Provincial Government. The government has taken these kind of decision due to the appreciation of the material conditions on the ground considering the rurality and the limited resources in the province to do whatever it takes to arrest the spread of this virus before it can reach the ICU's and the wards. To this end, the department took a decision that this can be done by screening, testing, quarantining and isolating all those who need to without fear, favour or prejudice.

It is against this background that the Limpopo Department of Health feels strongly that it must put into proper context the misleading public statements about the isolation of doctors from Modimolle who tested positive for COVID-19. Leading this crusade to misrepresent the department's stance on the issue is the South African Medical Association through its Chairperson Angelique Coetzee whom among many other things suggest that the two doctors should have been treated different from anyone probably on the basis that they are doctors. The department cannot apply rules selectively. The department announced last week that due to non compliance to the rules of self isolation by some patients of COVID-19, all those who test positive will be taken into its isolation site for the prescribed period. Since then, a number of patients have been taken to the site without any problem.

After their test came out positive on the 30th of March 2020, the department contacted the two doctors in order to take them to isolation. The two doctors bluntly refused and said they will only go if they are ordered by a court of law. After enduring fierce rebellion and undermining from the doctors, yesterday (02 April 2020) the department had to approach the court for an order to take them into isolation which the court granted.

What Angelique Cotzee does not want to mention is that the two after testing released their domestic worker back to the informal settlement where she stays with a 9 year old child and told her to self quarantine whereby they know very well that the social circumstances would not allow such. If they were as responsible as Angelique claims, they should have notified the health authorities on time.

Of much concern to us as the department is that medical doctors who are supposed to be leaders in the fight against the COVID-19 issues are the ones who are non- cooperative to the extent that they even exposed their community to a possible super spreader.

It is absolutely disingenuous for the Chairperson of SAMA to seek to create an impression that the department and the MEC are targeting the two doctors. Already, there are other COVID-19

asymptomatic patients at the isolation site and there were no grounds for Limpopo Department of Health to treat these patients with exceptions.

There are other health professionals who are our own Limpopo employees in that facility and we didn't treat them differently and place them in other facilities. Because we are not applying our approach selectively, everyone who tests positive is taken there. It has nothing to do with whether you can self isolate or not but rather removing a further risk to the community. We thought that we could do that early in the epidemic and possibly flatten the curve early.

Equally, as the department we find it to be extremely petty for SAMA to utilise uncorroborated inuendos attributed to the MEC in order to attack the person of the MEC. At no point did the MEC told the doctors to go back to Mpumalanga. If anything the MEC and the department has been working with the Mpumalanga Department of Health to ensure that this issue is handled seamlessly.

NICD guidelines are remains guidelines and not a rule of thumb or a prescription.

It would be incorrect to apply our principles selectively particularly those who have access to higher authorities/ powers.

We call upon SAMA and all other relevant stakeholders to invest their energy and join hands and work with government to curb the spread of this virus. The department believes it is too early to fight each other about petty issues such as this one.

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