

Community Working Group on Health (CWGH)



Press Statement

15 February 2017

Government must fulfil promises to health workers

The Community Working Group on Health (CWGH) would like to express grave concern about the recurrent strikes by doctors following failure by government to address their long-standing concerns. Presently, the country's major referral hospitals in Harare and Bulawayo have literally closed their outpatients departments and cancelled emergencies, a situation that could result in prolonged human suffering and avoidable deaths.

As CWGH, we strongly believe that the current labour dispute could have been resolved amicably if the government had honoured the promises it made to the medical practitioners last year. The Ministry of Health and Child Care (MoHCC) and the Health Services Board (HSB) promised to raise the doctors' on-call allowances and implement a motor vehicle duty-free among other issues.

The doctors are also worried by an announcement by government that it would no longer employ them upon completion of their two-year internship, a situation that would render them jobless. If the government cannot absorb the doctors into the public health system, why can't it give them open practising certificates than rendering them redundant after several years of training?

We would like to remind the government that giving false promises to the doctors will not address the concerns at hand. There is need to tackle the problems with the seriousness they deserve and stop giving political statements.

It is surprising that the MoHCC has now offered to open up 250 new post for junior doctors and 2 000 for nurses when it has not fulfilled last year's promises to the same doctors. The doctors' scepticism could be justified as it looks like gimmick to buy time considering previous unfulfilled assurances.

The health workforce is central in any health system and gaps in adequate health workers are cited as one barrier in efforts to achieve health and development in Zimbabwe. It is also time that the government allocates more funding to the health sector for the attainment of universal health coverage and ensuring that health workers are adequately remunerated. While we acknowledge that Zimbabwe is experiencing an economic crisis, the country needs

to devise innovative domestic ways of funding the health sector to ensure health delivery system is not compromised as is the case now.

The CWGH also calls for the immediate review of the current staff establishment in the health sector to reflect the current environment. It is unbelievable that the MoHCC is still using a staff establishment of 1983 when the country's population was only 7.5 million but has since doubled and disease burden increased. Such a situation has put the burden on the poorly remunerated health workers. This situation also points to the urgent need to speedily pass the Public Health Act (PHA) Amendment Bill that would address the issue of staff establishment.

Dialogue is the only way to save lives of patients in dire need of medical attention. Threatening to fire the medical practitioner will not address the concerns at hand but will only escalate the crisis. We must not go the Kenyan way, where the government arrested leaders of striking doctors, preventing them from exercising their democratic right to express themselves and protest peacefully. Dialogue is the way to go.

Without health workers there can be no health system. Zimbabwe is suffering from an unprecedented shortage of health workers but with almost 4000 qualified nurses sitting at home. Significant numbers have migrated to other countries. Within the country, many have found employment to urban hospitals and the private sector, leading to rural shortfalls. Delivering equitable health systems calls for immediate and forward-looking measures to retain health workers and ensure they can work effectively, especially within district and primary care systems.

The first, and immediate steps are often financial, to address real wage declines and improve real earnings. These new salary scales are best backed by a mix of incentives that address health workers' concerns, including opportunities for professional development, meaningful career paths and training loans as well as improved working, living and social conditions.

Health workers need incentives that address their social needs, such as transport, housing, children's education, electricity, community support and access to health care. These measures have been shown to improve retention of health workers and improve their performance.

Health workers should also not put their patients at risk by engaging in industrial action, but we also strongly feel that there must be speedy, fair and impartial procedure for resolving disputes. Long standing grievances simply should not be allowed to build up but addressed promptly.

Itai Rusike (Mr)
Executive Director
Community Working Group on Health (CWGH)
312 Samora Machel Ave, Eastlea, Harare, Zimbabwe
Mobile: +263 77236 3991
Tel: +263-4-498692, 498983, 498926
Email: itai@cwgh.co.zw
Website: www.cwgh.co.zw
"Health is Your Right and Responsibility"