

COMMUNITY WORKING GROUP ON HEALTH



Press Statement

Date: 18 April 2018

Government must address nurses' grievances, stop blaming politics

THE drastic action by government of firing all striking nurses nationwide after they turned down what they had been offered and blaming the job action on politics is an act in futility as it does not address the real causes of the industrial action. It is a complete disregard of the rights of both nurses and patients who are suffering and dying in droves at the scantily staffed health institutions. The solutions lies in tackling problems head-on and not scapegoating as this will only aid to prolong the current stalemate.

The government yesterday summarily dismissed the striking nurses after the refused to return to work without putting pen to paper after their employer promised to avail over \$17 million. But what it disturbing is the swiftness with which government started a process of engaging students, unemployed nurses and retired health workers further fueling suspicion and killing the spirit of genuine dialogue.

The nurses are demanding better pay and improved working conditions. They are complaining about the insufficiency of medical, surgical, human resources and equipment at health centres, among other issues -- grievances which have been outstanding for a long time.

The Community Working Group on Health (CWGH) does not approve of strike but encourage genuine dialogue between the government and the nurses to avoid the unnecessary suffering and deaths of innocent people. We believe the problems in the health sector cannot be solved through intimidation, threats and dismissal. The CWGH deplors the militancy taken by government and calls for dialogue between the two.

It should be noted that the strike by nurses comes before the health sector recovers from the one-month-long job action by doctors who were also demanding better remunerations, working conditions and the general absence of tools of their trade in health institutions. CWGH is greatly concerned, not only by the current job action but by the recurrent nature of the strikes, meaning that the fundamental causes of these strikes are not being tackled adequately. We do not need stop-gap measures but lasting solutions.

The action by government to deploy students, unemployed nurses and those that had been retired in health centres will further put in danger the lives of patients as most of them need refresher training courses to keep them abreast with the ever-changing health sector.

The dismissal of the nurses, which was surprisingly endorsed by the highest offices, clearly shows the new dispensation's lack of tolerance, patience, negotiating and dialoguing skills.

Labelling the strike “politically-motivated” when everyone can clearly see the naked causes of the job action points to insincerity and hypocrisy at its highest order. Empty promises, militant stance and piecemeal solutions will not address the causes; we need lasting solution because the health workforce is central to a proper health delivery system. Our leaders should not see political shadows where there are none.

The new political administration must be reminded that Zimbabweans, including the striking nurses, had high hopes of a better future when it took over the levers of power but now they are frustrated as they see their hopes varnish like morning dew. Remember, the future of Zimbabwe depends on decisions you make today.

CWGH feels that health worker grievances must be dealt with by the Health Services Board (HSB) and the Ministry of Health and Child Care (MoHCC). Why in the first place set up the HSB then fail to give it autonomous and adequate resources to be able address the worsening conditions of health workers as per regional standards? As it is, the Board is just draining the fiscus through fat monthly salaries, huge allowances and luxurious vehicles without executing its mandate.

It is worrying that the Board does not have independent capacity to make decision that have a bearing on the welfare of health workers because the Health Services Act stipulates that any decision that has a bearing on the Consolidated Revenue Fund must be agreed upon with the Ministry of Finance. This actually renders any negotiations or agreements with the HSB meaningless and waste of time. We call upon the government to give HSB the power and resources it deserve for it to properly execute its mandate because at the moment it is a just a feeding trough.

The strike has a serious impact on the already strained health sector which does not have enough medical personnel, drugs and equipment. The absence of nurses in health institutions at a time there are frequent outbreaks of diseases such as typhoid and cholera as well as shortages of medicines of chronic illnesses means more deaths of ordinary Zimbabweans. The strike also comes at a time the country’s emergency services have been grounded due to poor funding from central government.

In the interest of the suffering and dying patients, the CWGH calls upon the striking health workers and the government quickly ensure that normalcy returns in the country’s health institutions. It should be noted that politicking and blame-gaming will not resuscitate the country’s broken and non-functional public health delivery system. Only sincere dialogue will let us out of the current health dilemma.

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