

Speech at the launch of the Positive Practice Environment Campaign
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Good morning and thank you for inviting me to the launch of this very important and historic campaign. I am from an organisation called SECTION27, a public interest law NGO working on issues of health and education. It is heartening to see health care professionals coming together to make health care services better both for those who use those services and for those who provide them.

The 8 pillars of the Positive Practice Environment Campaign (workplace safety, payment, equipment, supplies, resources, education, support and respect) are pivotal to making a health care system that works and I applaud the organisers of this launch, everyone here today showing support for the campaign, and the various other stakeholders who are going to work together to make this a reality.

I was invited here today to introduce to you another campaign that fits very well with the PPE campaign.

Over the last few years, but particularly in the last year, SECTION27 and its partners have been receiving reports from across the Eastern Cape about problems in the health system. These reports have come from both health care workers and patients.

We have been told about facilities that are crumbling, some without electricity or running water; about immunisations stored in gas fridges that sometimes freeze and sometimes melt; about filthy and insufficient staff accommodation; about shortages of doctors and nurses; and medicines stockouts that leave health care workers frustrated and demotivated and patients defaulting on treatment and developing resistance. We have been told about the inability to fill posts because of a freeze on posts vacated before April; about salaries, performance bonuses and rural allowances being underpaid or not being paid at all. We have been told about clinics without a single BP machine or scale to weigh babies getting vaccinated. We have heard about a nurse breaking her arm trying to climb the steep muddy slope to the filthy latrine, the only toilet available to staff and patients at the clinic. We've been told of a woman who had to wait twenty four hours in a hospital for the baby that died in her womb to be removed after being told to walk around the ward with blood gushing out of her; of a TB hospital without an x-ray machine for 4 years; of community health care workers who don't have masks for visits to the homes of TB patients; of children with cerebral palsy who have to wait over a year for a wheelchair: a year that is spent lying in bed. The list goes on.

It is clear that there is a crisis in Eastern Cape health.

To respond to this crisis, a number of partners with different interests but a single goal joined together to form the Eastern Cape Health Crisis Action Coalition.

The partners in this Coalition are DENOSA; SAMA; RuDASA; JuDASA; RuReSA; the RHAP; the PSAM; Democracy from Below; the TAC and SECTION27.

The objectives of the Coalition include:

1. Strengthening health care workers and building unions and community organisations acting in the interests of health and human rights
2. Encouraging HCWs to speak out and defending HCWs from victimisation when they do so
3. Mobilising a campaign around the right to health in the Eastern Cape and using the law to ensure a plan and resources for quality health care in the Eastern Cape.

I am here today on behalf of the Coalition, of which DENOSA and SAMA are members, to ask you to support the campaign to resolve the crisis in Eastern Cape health and to speak out about the conditions at your facility that make your job difficult and limit the services that you are able to provide to patients.

Speaking out is seldom easy. While the Protected Disclosures Act and Intimidation Act are designed to protect you from occupational and personal threats and detriments as a result of speaking out, the law is not perfect and HCWs often feel too intimidated to speak out. There is an assumption that if you keep quiet, the situation will get better on its own. The sad truth is that it is unlikely to do so.

Improving health care services and the conditions in which HCWs work depends on the bravery of those in the know. And in the case of health care facilities, those in the know are often the doctors and nurses in those facilities

Fortunately in speaking out you are not alone. Many HCWs across the province have already stood up and spoken out about the conditions in their facilities. As the union movement knows well, there is strength in numbers.

Many of you are at the coalface of the Eastern Cape health crisis. You treat real people, engage real problems and make people healthier on a daily basis. Many of you will see yourselves as advocates for the patients you treat.

I'd like to invite and encourage you to support this campaign alongside the PPE campaign and to join us in September when we march to Bhisho to demand a plan and resources to resolve the Eastern Cape health crisis. Without HCWs standing up and speaking out, the battle for better health services in the Eastern Cape will be difficult to win.