

SAMA MEDIA STATEMENT



SAMA RESPONDS TO THE STATE OF THE NATION ADDRESS

07 February 2025

The 2025 State of the Nation Address (SONA) presented an opportunity for government to address the most pressing issues in South Africa's healthcare system. While The South African Medical Association (SAMA) commends the progress that was highlighted in some areas, the address failed to engage critically with the realities faced by the healthcare workforce and the government's vehicle of choice to achieve universal health coverage, the National Health Insurance (NHI). The omission of these vital issues has serious implications for healthcare service delivery and public health outcomes.

SAMA is deeply concerned that the President did not acknowledge the issue of unemployed healthcare workers. South Africa continues to face a critical shortage of healthcare personnel in public hospitals, yet thousands of qualified healthcare workers remain without jobs. Addressing this disconnect requires urgent policy interventions, particularly in recruitment and funding allocation to absorb trained professionals into the system.

The President's remarks on the NHI were presented without acknowledgment of the fact that the second Presidential Health Compact was overwhelmingly rejected by most partners who signed the first compact. The lack of consensus on the NHI remains a critical challenge, particularly given concerns about funding sustainability and governance. SAMA has extensively critiqued the NHI Bill, arguing that the financial model is unsustainable and could limit rather than expand access to healthcare services. For the NHI to succeed, broad consultation with critical stakeholders, including healthcare professionals, must be prioritised.

A major positive development in SONA was the announcement of ring-fencing water and electricity utilities. This decision will have far-reaching benefits, including improving quality of life for all South Africans by ensuring reliable access to essential utilities, reducing infectious diseases linked to poor hygiene and sanitation, while curbing water-borne diseases. Hospitals and clinics depend on stable water and electricity supplies to be able to fulfil their critical role of healthcare service delivery. Electricity is also important for ensuring the safety of healthcare workers, who often work night shifts in poorly lit and crime-prone environments. Given that ring-fencing is possible for utilities, the same principle should be applied to healthcare funding.

The collapse of South Africa's healthcare system demands urgent attention. By ring-fencing the health budget, the government can ensure that funds are not reallocated, thereby addressing chronic underfunding and inefficiencies that have led to deteriorating public health services, severe understaffing, which is directly linked to funding constraints. The suspension of USAID funding threatens the country's ability to maintain HIV/AIDS treatment gains achieved over the past two decades. This adds more healthcare budget demands on the national fiscus. The economic and social

risks of a failing healthcare system, and the resurgence of HIV/AIDS challenges could have devastating long-term effects.

The commitment to building new healthcare facilities is a positive step towards addressing the country's healthcare infrastructure needs. However, it is crucial that adequate human resources for these new hospitals and clinics have been sufficiently budgeted for. Without sufficient staffing, these new facilities may struggle to provide quality care and could exacerbate existing workforce shortages rather than alleviate them.

The President's recognition of artificial intelligence (AI) in revenue services, home affairs, and international relations is encouraging. However, AI's potential to revolutionise healthcare was not mentioned. AI-driven innovations can enhance healthcare efficiency, improve clinical outcomes, and address disparities in healthcare access. If applied effectively, AI could be instrumental in driving healthcare equity in South Africa.

While the President addressed corruption broadly, an update on the Healthcare Sector Anti-Corruption Forum was conspicuously absent. Corruption in healthcare procurement and service delivery continues to undermine patient care and public trust. Transparency and accountability must be strengthened to prevent mismanagement of resources and ensure that funding reaches those in need.

Doctors and healthcare workers all over the world dedicate their lives to improving the well-being of all. Yet, they frequently become victims of conflict and violence while trying to save lives. We fully support the call for the silencing of guns in Africa and emphasise the need to protect healthcare workers in conflict zones. We extend our condolences to the families of South Africans who have lost loved ones, including our healthcare colleagues, despite all efforts to save them.

The SONA 2025 provided some positive developments, but it also highlighted a disconnect between government policy and the realities faced by the healthcare sector. Addressing the healthcare workforce crisis, ensuring financial sustainability for universal health coverage, and safeguarding public health funding must become top priorities. The government must engage meaningfully with healthcare professionals and stakeholders to build a resilient, equitable, and efficient healthcare system for all South Africans.

(ENDS)

Notes to Editors

About SAMA: The South African Medical Association ("SAMA") was established in 1927 and became known as it is today through the unification of a variety of doctors' groups on 21 May 1998 that had represented a diversity of interests. SAMA is a non-statutory, professional association for public and private sector medical practitioners. SAMA is registered a non-profit company in terms of the Companies Act. SAMA is a voluntary membership association, existing to serve the best interests and needs of its members in all healthcare-related matters.

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