

THE SOUTH AFRICAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION NPC

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Open Letter to: His Excellency President Cyril Ramaphosa

URGENT CALL TO ADDRESS THE JUNIOR DOCTOR UNEMPLOYMENT CRISIS

Dear President Ramaphosa,

South Africa stands at a crossroads in its healthcare history. Over 1,800 junior doctors, having completed their mandatory community service and demonstrated their willingness to serve even in the most underserved areas, now find themselves unemployed despite the glaring shortage of medical professionals in our public health system. This is detrimental to not only the delivery of quality healthcare to millions of South Africans, but also to health care as a basic human right. We require your urgent intervention.

The consequences of this crisis extend far beyond the doctors themselves. Many departments in public hospitals are dangerously understaffed, forcing existing healthcare workers to shoulder unsustainable workloads. Burnout and the loss of peers to depression is at an all-time high, yet the quality of patient care is in decline. With only 0.3 doctors per 1,000 people in the public sector, well below the World Health Organization's recommendation of 1 per 1,000, this crisis undermines the constitutional right of South Africans to access quality healthcare.

Beyond the immediate impact, this unemployment crisis threatens the long-term stability of our healthcare system. South Africa faces a quadruple burden of disease that demands a robust and well-staffed medical workforce. Yet, the inability to employ junior doctors due to fiscal constraints undermines both our healthcare delivery and the significant public investment in training these professionals. Moreover, limited registrar posts prevent these doctors from specialising, stalling their careers, weakening the teaching capacity of our public health system and limiting patient access to specialist care. Many are forced to volunteer, work without pay in the public sector just to maintain their skills and hope for eventual employment. This fuels emigration, exacerbating the brain drain and further weakening our healthcare system.

We acknowledge the fiscal constraints faced by the government. However, addressing this crisis requires more than acknowledgment. Concrete action is needed to secure funding, estimated at R2 billion annually, to create posts for medical officers and registrars. This funding can be achieved by reprioritising provincial health budgets, allocating additional resources from National Treasury, improving revenue collection at health facilities, reducing administrative costs and consultancy fees, and enforcing zero tolerance for corruption.

As the Junior Doctors Association of South Africa (JUDASA), a sub-committee of the South African Medical Association (SAMA), we urge the government to develop a comprehensive plan to address the root causes of this crisis. Left unresolved, this situation will lead to deteriorating healthcare services, loss of skilled professionals to the private sector and abroad, and ultimately, the collapse of our public healthcare system.

We want to paint a picture of what our current system looks like. Imagine Province X, with three health care facilities: a district hospital, a regional hospital and a tertiary hospital. Late at night, three patients arrive at the district hospital where only one doctor is on duty after hours. The first patient is a pregnant woman in labour, bleeding heavily, and in

urgent need of a caesarean section. The doctor calls a colleague who must drive in from home to assist with the anaesthesia. The second patient is a young child coughing, their small frame trembling with anxiety. The third is a young man with a gunshot wound to the abdomen, critically unstable and in need of surgery. While awaiting theatre, the doctor begins resuscitating the gunshot victim, stabilising him, but the patient needs theatre. The nearest regional hospital, however, has no surgeon on duty due to staff shortages. The only option is to transfer him to the tertiary centre four hours away. As the clock ticks, the doctor turns to the child, now pale, cold, and unresponsive; dead before the doctor could even intervene. The system failed this child long before they reached the hospital doors. The doctor rushes to perform the caesarean section. Fortunately, the mother and baby survive. But upon leaving the operating theatre, the doctor finds the gunshot patient still waiting for the ambulance, cold and dead.

Though this account may seem hypothetical, it mirrors the grim reality faced by South African doctors every day. The government's failure to adequately staff and fund healthcare facilities is not only costing doctors their livelihoods but it is also costing patients their lives. Our once respected profession is now at risk. If this is the reality South African doctors face, what message are we sending the next generation? Should we advise schoolchildren not to dream of becoming doctors in a country where the healthcare system – and a career as a doctor – seems to hold so little value?

Mr. President, we call on you to act decisively. Prioritise the employment of junior doctors into the public sector and ensure sustainable funding for healthcare services. The health of our nation and the trust of its people in the government depends on your leadership in this critical moment. We are doctors in waiting, while patients are in need.

Sincerely,



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Dr DS Breedt
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