Mabasa – one good SAMA man into the breach

Stepping into a political maelstrom by accepting his appointment as Limpopo’s Health Minister, the softly spoken former South African Medical Association (SAMA) chairperson, Dr Norman Mabasa, was unexpectedly robust when asked ‘What on earth were you thinking?’ last month.

The turbulent province is now over R2 billion in debt, with a joint national ministerial task team having stepped in to take emergency corrective measures – with all the attendant internal politicking and finger-pointing. The health department, tainted by as yet unproven allegations of R314 million in disputed pharmaceutical contracts involving relatives and associates of former ANC Youth League President, Julius Malema (a close friend and political ally of Premier Cassel Mathale), is officially R437 million in the red (after narrowly honouring its Occupation Specific Dispensation (OSD) commitments). There are 39 653 vacant health posts.

Mabasa told *Izindaba*: ‘No doctor wants to claim victory on a healthy patient.’ When the executive of the province approached him to ‘help re-engineer’ the health department, he says he reasoned that a refusal would be to avoid taking on responsibility for change. ‘I thought, if we’ve been complaining that the system is ailing and they ask us to help ease the process, then who do we want to send to carry the process in the late 1990s and subsequently managed, chaired and served as president of the organisation, Mabasa said doctors would not lose his contribution. ‘If the profession is stable and I’m asked to serve the other side (society) and I have the national interest at heart, there’s no reason to refuse. From my point of view it could be better for the profession to have someone they can relate to. They won’t have to bring their CVs to meetings. They know me and I know them. I think it’s a win-win,’ he added. While sad at leaving SAMA where he played a pivotal role in the medical group’s unity process in the late 1990s and subsequently managed, chaired and served as president of the organisation, Mabasa said doctors would have a new structure that hopefully positions us better for the future and aims to avoid the mistakes of the past.’

**SAMa’s new Acting Chairperson**

The Acting Chairperson of SAMA will be Mabasa’s former deputy, Dr Mark Sonderup, a senior specialist and lecturer at the University of Cape Town/Groote Schuur Hospital in the Division of Hepatology/Liver Research Centre. Sonderup, a veteran of medical politics (former vice-chair of the Junior Doctors Association of South Africa (JUDASA), former chair of the South African Registrars Association (SARA), former chair and president of SAMa’s Cape Western Branch and a member of SAMa’s health policy committee since 2004, who will remain in the position until the national council elects the SAMA leadership for the next 3 years this September.

He told *Izindaba*: ‘It’s not nice to lose Norman because of his stature and what he’s meant to the association in terms of his ability to gel people together – after a significant period of turbulence. We’re still on the road to mending it and part of that is formally bringing the private specialists back. I’ve been at the helm of driving that on behalf of the board and Esco. It’s a bit like part of the family’s missing even though there are a number of specialists whom we continue to serve.’ Key areas he would focus on included remaining the leading doctors’ voice on National Health Insurance (NHI), pressurising government to effectively deal with the ‘myriad of issues’ in the public healthcare sector, and tackling tariff issues and the emphasisation of the doctors’ voice in the private sector. Sonderup vowed to continue re-aligning and restructuring the association, its branches, the board and its committees, adding, ‘We aim to hand over a new structure that hopefully positions us better for the future and aims to avoid the mistakes of the past.’