



AIDS DENIALISM GETS NASTIER AT MANGUZI



Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang and her KwaZulu-Natal counterpart Peggy Nkonyeni.

KwaZulu-Natal Health MEC, Peggy Nkonyeni, has been accused by three prestigious medical bodies and the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) of spurning dialogue while vindictively pursuing bogus charges against two dedicated Manguzi doctors.

In continuing her 'witch-hunt' against Mark Heywood, the hospital's senior medical officer who famously stuffed her picture into a rubbish bin in February, and his colleague Colin Pfaff, for the earlier 'unauthorised' roll-out of PMTCT dual therapy, she had exceeded the bounds of privacy and could face legal action, they warned.

The South African Medical Association (SAMA), the Rural Doctors Association of South Africa (RUDASA), the HIV Clinicians society and the TAC last month accused her of renegeing on an agreement to hold follow-up meetings with them to resolve the conflict after an initial exploratory get-together at the height of the spat.

Instead, they claim she upped the ante by 'leaking' further damaging claims against Blaylock, including details of his private medical history and adding assault and bribery charges to those already being probed by her provincial 'task team'.

The two Manguzi doctors, widely respected among locals for their committed tenure and life-saving overseas-funded rollout of PMTCT dual therapy, were initially suspended by Nkonyeni but reinstated after a national outcry in health care circles.

In spite of a meeting with the TAC on 21 May, attended by provincial ANC chairperson (and former Health MEC), Dr Zweli Mkhize, at which Nkonyeni promised to meet with stakeholders within a fortnight, no further dialogue transpired. The TAC claims she 'rebuffed' all subsequent attempts at mediation.

Nkonyeni appointed a costly consultancy to probe Manguzi's PMTCT patient records (to back up her contention that the roll-out was 'unauthorised'), while her public relations officer 'leaked' to *The Natal Witness* that Blaylock 'may or may not have been admitted to a psychiatric institution'. The TAC described both these actions as flagrant violations of privacy and the National Health Act, of which she was a custodian.

Echoes of Manto/*Sunday Times* debacle?

Mark Heywood, Director of the AIDS Law Project and lawyer for the doctors, said that the Health Act (unsuccessfully used by national health minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang to attack the *Sunday Times* for their 'expose' of her as 'a thief and a liar') reinforced the public duty to protect privacy.

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He said Tshabalala-Msimang lost her court case because the public interest overrode her right to privacy, but dragging Blaylock's past through the mud was an entirely different matter. 'He could easily sue for defamation – we've offered to appear for him *pro bono*, but he's unsure right now,' he revealed. In an exclusive interview, Blaylock told *Izindaba* he was 'surprised at the depths' Nkonyeni was allowing herself to plumb.

'At the moment I'm trying to convince myself that it's not personal, that she doesn't have a clue who I am and is just trying to make a pariah out of me, but it's quite hard when you get phoned by journalists to confirm seven cases of assault and bribery and they quote her PR as telling them I may or may not have been admitted to a psychiatric institution at some stage.' Blaylock confided the 'real story' behind this to *Izindaba* in the interests of his own credibility, but stressed that it had no relevance to the public interest or the current context. His hospital manager has publicly rebutted virtually all of the other allegations being probed by the 'task team'.

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Heywood has taken the 'ongoing victimisation' of the Manguzi doctors to the Human Rights Commission (HRC) in KwaZulu-Natal.

HRC clogged with xenophobia claims

Professor Karthy Govender, HRC spokesperson, said his office was busy



In the eye of the storm; Doctors Mark Blaylock (left) and Colin Pfaff.

eliciting a response from Nkonyeni. The reason for the delay was that 'we've had a bit of a problem dealing with all the xenophobia issues, but we should be back on track next week (7 - 11 July)'. Govender said the TAC complaint centred on an abuse of patient rights and those of the doctors.

The commission would decide, based on Nkonyeni's response, whether to begin mediation or hold a formal hearing. If the complaint pointed to an abuse of powers, it could be referred to the Public Protector.

Blaylock's angry rubbish-bin gesture followed Nkonyeni speaking in derogatory terms at a Manguzi rally about the dual therapy roll-out and making veiled inferences that the doctors were somehow behind the cutting back of food parcels to the locals. (They had changed the hand-out criteria to a body mass index quantum because of the paucity of parcels.)

Nkonyeni subsequently, with Tshabalala-Msimang's approval, lambasted them in her provincial legislature budget speech. She is the ANC treasurer in KwaZulu-Natal.

According to an affidavit handed in at the Pietermaritzburg magistrate's court last month, the Scorpions are probing

Nkonyeni's relationship with the owner of a private company that recently won a R1.5 million cancer scanner order from her department. The affidavit is in support of warrants to search the health department's local offices and those of the supplier company which allegedly could have sourced the same equipment for R425 000.

The TAC said Nkonyeni's actions at Manguzi 'epitomise the growing thuggery and moral decay within the ANC'. She had a 'track record of incompetence', which included falsely accusing microbicide researchers of unethically experimenting on people and supporting charlatan and vitamin salesman, Matthias Rath, a close ally of Tshabalala-Msimang.

- Forty per cent of pregnant women attending health facilities in KwaZulu-Natal are HIV positive, the highest prevalence in the country. Hospitals in the Manguzi district have the ninth highest uptake of PMTCT among 53 districts nationwide, with nearly 97% of babies in the district now immunised.

Chris Bateman