

Dr. Thys von Mollendorff: a matter of professional loyalty – “to the patient or to Caesar?”

“How many times have we acted to serve our own convenience instead of following the dictates of professional responsibility?”

Have we remained true to the oaths and pledges that we solemnly swore when we entered our professions? Do we understand the living link between the Bill of Rights of our country and our practice of health care professionals?

I ask all these questions not simply to highlight the negative, but to focus our thoughts on the task of building the commitment of the huge cadre of health workers, who face constant challenges, often under trying conditions, and whose expertise and compassion is the life blood of the health service.”

President Thabo Mbeki. Health Summit in Sandton, November 20th, 2001.

Dr von Mollendorff, the Medical Superintendent of Rob Ferreira Hospital, Nelspruit, was suspended on 15 February 2002 by the Mpumalanga Department of Health, for allowing a NGO, the Greater Nelspruit Rape Intervention Project (GRIP), to occupy a room at his hospital, from which it provided counselling to rape survivors and offered them antiretroviral drugs.

The Department of Health proclaims that its mission is “to focus on working in partnership with other stakeholders to improve the quality of care of all levels of the health system, especially preventive and promotive health!” Was allowing GRIP to offer care to rape survivors not a perhaps part of a valuable partnership? Is the AZT that GRIP offers to rape survivors not part of preventative medicine?

“Batho Pele” People first. That is what the Department of Health tries to promote. The Batho Pele principles² includes that people be given a choice about the services offered to them. Why does one then need to exclude the choice of receiving AZT after being raped? Another notable Batho Pele principle is that all citizens should have equal access to those services to which they are entitled. Can one not argue that the NGO does improve access to drugs that are potentially life saving?

The question begs: Did Dr von Mollendorff not act according to the Department of Health's stated vision? When one recalls the honourable state president's words, it is hard not to conclude that Dr von Mollendorff did follow the dictates of his professional responsibility and that he did remain true to the oath he swore when he entered the profession. Is he then not a health worker the president should be proud of?

It is rather uncomfortable to be reminded of Steve Biko's death, a sad case in history during which doctors apparently acted in a way that put adherence to government policies before the best interest of their patient. The medical profession at that point in time failed to take a stand. It is imperative at this time that the medical profession takes a stand on what is in the best interest for those who are affected by HIV/AIDS. A failure to do this will see the medical profession facing similar charges of complicity with politicians.

Unfortunately incidents like the suspension of Dr von Mollendorff makes “the task of building the commitment of the huge cadre of health workers” extremely difficult. We desperately need experienced doctors who can teach and assist junior doctors in

peripheral hospitals. With his suspension the health services lost his 21 years of “expertise and compassion.” Too many community service doctors have to work in facilities where senior support is not available, and this has been repeatedly pointed out to the Department of Health. Our country cannot afford to lose doctors of his rare breed. His suspension places the public health services in an ominous light amongst prospective doctors and demoralises those already working for the state.

Furthermore, this has major implications for all managers in the public sector. Apart from anything else, good management is about taking appropriate decisions at a local level. Threats like these will make the process of decentralisation very difficult, as other managers may fail to act decisively in case politicians gainsay them.

South Africa has an outstanding Bill of Rights. Our hard-won democracy needs to be protected and nurtured at all costs. As medical professionals we dare not keep quiet, and have to insist that patients and not politics come first. The freedom to act according to one's professional values should never, never be questioned.

1. Downloaded from <http://196.36.153.56/doh/about/index.html> on 14 March 2002
2. Downloaded from <http://www.doh.gov.za/docs/index.html> on 14 March 2002

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