

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a fashionable buzz word at present. There is no question that we need development in South Africa. It is also true that there are many health care systems that have developed beyond the capacity of countries to maintain them.

In South Africa, medical aid schemes have to find ways of reducing benefits so that members can afford to pay for what they get. Countries around the globe are not only talking about it, but are actually tightening their medical belts to try and suit their ability to pay. Cost containment is upon us whether we like it or not. We have to live with it.

There are several reasons why it is very difficult for us as doctors to accept decreasing budgets as all the hospitals have to in South Africa today. Mostly it is because of the way in which we were reared into our profession. We were enculturated into a profession that says: only the best for the patient no matter the cost. There is also the strong conviction that there must be freedom of choice for both doctor and patient. Both we in the profession and society speak and act as if the pinnacle of quality and development is when we have the latest and most advanced technology. This kind of thinking has now reached its limit. It can no longer be sustained. If we continue to live and work with the ideas about *excellence* that we have been brought up on, we will regress into bankruptcy and be disgruntled and dangerous to society.

If we redefine excellence, it could become possible to do better than before with sustainable resources. To achieve this we will have to change both our thinking and our attitudes. To build something in the future it will have to be done in partnership with our patients, their families and communities, if we want it to be sustainable. A partnership means that both partners bear responsibility and both lose some of their freedom as they have to consider one another's interests for the partnership to work. At present, there are too many systems in which we spend other peoples money, both as patients and as doctors. However, nothing is free and sooner or later the goose that lays the golden egg is eaten. If excellence becomes the optimum balance we can achieve for a person, family or society, we may actually promote more healthy people than before.

When people face the constraints they have to live with squarely, there are many options to choose from and we are not reduced to whining about not having the most expensive technology available. If we start to think more ecologically and live as if there are long term consequences that follow different life styles, then good health will cost us less than the expensive repair jobs we go for today.

To be sustainable the development or reconstruction of our health care system needs to be within the material and conceptual resources that our communities and country have. If these are inadequate we'll have to work on both at the same time to succeed.

Sam Johnson