

The Future of Family Practice in South Africa

In May Dr Baughman, a family practitioner from South Carolina spoke at six venues across the country on the topic, "Anxious people in a nervous world". His experience is relevant to South Africa which is particularly nervous at this time in our history. People board trains on a daily basis not knowing if they will be alive at the end of the journey. Leaders visibly wilt in front of our eyes on the TV screen as we watch their faces change from day to day.

For politicians, who are negotiating the future, the constitution, the level of violence and the state of the economy are all more important issues than discussing details about a future health care system. If we want health to be debated at a serious level, we will have to place it on the table. We will determine the level of sophistication of the debate. We will have to take it beyond slogans and generalities.

If we want to influence what is going to happen in family practice/primary health care we will have to be there at the table. All the specialist disciplines together are a minority in the doctor population of South Africa. They have however had a majority on all the bodies that make and influence policy for a very long time. We have more people representing our interests today than ever before but they are still hampered by the apathy of the majority of practising generalist doctors. I meet many nervous general practitioners in private and public service. We worry about the future of medical practice. Who will be paying us? How much? What will happen to standards?

A body has been established to do something about this - the National Liaison Forum for Health

Professions. All health professions are represented on this body through existing associations within the professions. Those representing your interests as a general practitioner/family practitioner/primary health care doctor or whatever you name yourself, need support. You can help by becoming a member of the Academy of Family Practice/Primary Care (or any other primary care body you feel comfortable with). The more members we have, the more voice we have in negotiations. A flood of letters to the editor on issues relating to future health care system will also make a tremendous difference to the outcome of negotiations. Please bear in mind when you write, arguments to get a good deal for the patient go down much better than concern merely about the status and comfort of the doctor.

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