
EDITORIAL

Crisis

Garankuwa township, next to our medical school, is burning. More than 300 people have been attended to in our casualty department and about 8 people have died so far. Difficulties, disruption and violence is being experienced across the country in almost all the homelands. By the time you read this, it may even be worse; or calmer, hopefully.

South African medical schools are pessimistic about the survival of academic medicine and research of any standard. There is insufficient money for the job at hand, at least for doing it the way we have till now. There is desperation about the brain drain. Young graduates have been and still are, leaving the country at alarming rates. Senior staff are leaving academia for the private sector or other countries. The present attempts to negotiate autonomous administration for medical schools, and the ability to generate and retain money for the schools may contribute to a stemming of the tide.

Our health services is also in trouble with fragmentation and lack of funds. There is almost no expansion into areas of need. Large discrepancies still exist between the services, of town and country, to white and black, and between those who earn and the unemployed. The problems are immense and they cannot be solved by a dose of privatisation, as some may wish.

In all these areas we are beset with crisis. At such a time it was very good for me to learn about the Japanese word for crisis. It consists of the pictures for two other words, *danger* and *opportunity*. South Africa today cannot get anywhere if we focus only on the failure and danger in our crises. We as general practitioners, face this crisis daily, as we take care

of its physical and psychological wounds in our patients. To cover these up in a way that maintains the status quo by pacifying and ablating pain and anxiety, may actually lead us into greater danger. Now, more than ever before, we should use our imagination and compassion to grab hold of opportunity.

We owe it to our patients, our medical school, our health care system and our country to focus strongly on the opportunities in every crisis without loosing sight of the danger. It might as well become a way of life, as our South Africa has the kind of composition that can never be without danger. Without imaginative and positive leadership we are sure to spiral out of existence, and some outsiders will come to take the gold.

Sam Johnson