



PRESS STATEMENT JULY 2022: CALL FOR DIALOGUE IN EASTERN CAPE PROVINCE

The Rural Doctors Association of Southern Africa (RuDASA) would like to express our serious concern regarding the critical situation unfolding at Zithulele Hospital in the Eastern Cape, as reported by media releases on the 19th, 21st July and 28th of July 2022. We note an escalating situation that has resulted in the disruption of the excellent service delivery that has existed there for well over a decade; and a situation which has now deteriorated to the point of police assaulting peaceful protesters.

RuDASA firstly extends heartfelt condolences to all community members who were injured during their peaceful protest, and secondly recognises their right to peaceful protest to highlight their concerns over the effects that personalised attacks on staffing and clinical care will have on the communities that rely on this deep rural hospital.

Zithulele Hospital has been highlighted as a model of care - and indeed a beacon of hope - for excellent healthcare service provision in a rural setting, especially in a province that faces significant barriers to providing such care. The selfless leadership and a committed team of Zithulele staff have built an institutional culture that dared to dream that rural communities could also experience equity and excellence in healthcare. They ensured skilled clinical staff were drawn to the hospital and retained long-term, and that younger staff and new graduates were inspired by their experiences, seeding this much needed spirit of excellence in care throughout the South African healthcare sector.

We recognise that changes in management necessitate a season of change and transition within organisations. However, we note with dismay how this particular situation has been allowed to escalate into open conflict between new management and staff, to the point that it has affected the care that clinicians are able to provide their patients. This has created an unstable environment where many healthcare workers have been thrown into uncertainty regarding their futures at the hospital, risking a disastrous exodus of staff.

Rural health services remain fragile throughout South Africa, and everything should be done to support frontline healthcare workers in fulfilling their roles to care for the communities they serve, rather than undermine their best efforts.

To our members, we ask that you seek our help or guidance in finding ways to support our colleagues during this difficult time. We also open this offer to all healthcare workers affected by the current situation.

To the Department of Health, we call upon you to continue to recognise and uphold the need for equitable and appropriate support for rural healthcare; and to exercise greater accountability over situations that destabilise such services through their actions, especially those that threaten institutions that have decades-long records of excellent performance, such as Zithulele Hospital.

If this does not happen, then we fear it is fragile rural communities who end up paying the ultimate cost of disruptions to the services they so rightly deserve, and in such cases have rightly come to expect.