

Musings on Mayosi as Dean

The people wept. At the remarkable tribute to Bongani Mayosi's life on Saturday 4 August 2018, lasting five and a half hours and attended by more than two thousand people, there was sadness, celebration of his achievements, and much introspection. How could this modest, though highly influential, intellectual and popular leader inspire us to carry the baton of his vision now that he was no longer here?

His rise to national and international fame and influence is a matter of record, and he would have received recognition for his many achievements in any event. However, the massive national reaction to his loss to the nation through suicide, and consideration of the events preceding this, sparked a flurry of introspection and comment.

One of the many questions asked about his appointment as Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) was whether he had the capacity for the job. The answer is clear – he had this in abundance as evidenced by his stellar role as head of the Department of Medicine, as leader of a large research team and projects, and in many other influential leadership positions, nationally and internationally. Asked about my view on his appointment as Dean at the time, I opined that he was unlikely to stay long as he was destined for greater office. He was undoubtedly a great leader and manager.

However, shortly after he took office as Dean, the #FeesMustFall movement ripped through the country and UCT, and hit him particularly hard. Despite his being a passionate supporter of students and empathetic to their cause, the protesting students invaded his office and occupied it for a long period during which time he was subjected to vitriolic vilification. Compounding this was criticism from his senior colleagues about his perceived inability to manage what was an unmanageable situation. The rejection and vilification by the two main components of his domain, the students and the staff, must

have been devastating to this strong but sensitive man, for whom it must have been an awful new experience. Many at the funeral spoke about his capacity to make friends and influence staff and students to achieve greater heights.

The #FeesMustFall campaign left much devastation of physical property and, due to the intimidation and insults, also left many academic staff members suffering from post-traumatic stress. Black staff members were particularly targeted and labelled coconuts and sell-outs. This experience resulted in a number of academic leaders at other academic campuses in the country stepping down.

But the experience broke Bongani. Depressed, he twice turned to the University with the request to resign. The University itself was grappling with major crises, including the fallout from #FeesMustFall. Acting in good faith and in recognition of his unique talents, the University declined his resignation, but then set about establishing a senior post for him to lead research in the University. Alas, this was not to be.

A natural human response is to examine what went wrong and how to prevent similar future events. Guilt and blame are part of this process. A #FeesMustFall activist has sought to scapegoat the University, blaming it for not supporting Bongani, but the activists themselves have come under fire for their role.

Bongani's death has also sparked a further national conversation about the devastating effects that depression has on many people and about the lack of sympathy and the stigma that often accompany this affliction. When someone takes their life, we are also likely to feel guilty about our inability to fully understand the significance of the condition, and about whether we might have been able to be of greater assistance.

The post of Dean in the FHS is unlike others in the University. When, as in Bongani's case, the Dean is appointed from within the academic ranks, the vacated

post of the appointee is filled by another permanent appointment. There is therefore no going back if and when the Dean's tenure is terminated, which is a major impediment for someone who may wish to return to teaching and research. I have some personal experience in this regard. When I was appointed Dean of the FHS some years ago, I was aware of this situation and was willing to take the risk as a 'career dean' as opposed to a shorter-term model. However, shortly after my appointment to a second term, the newly appointed vice-chancellor pressed for my removal as she did not want to go into this century with white deans. Not to leave me in limbo, the post of 'Dean Emeritus' was invented to accommodate me. Despite new opportunities in the post of Dean, for Bongani the more immediate reality of taking distance from his greatest passions – teaching and research – must also have weighed heavily when he was appointed.

There have been calls for an investigation around Bongani's death. However, would that provide further useful insight, as the facts are known, and we have no access to what must have been his troubled mind? He had been caught up in the vortex of a perfect storm – alienation of students and academic colleagues who challenged his core values; the destruction caused by #FeesMustFall; and the perceived lack of support from his university. It has been said that the closest we can get to immortality is to have influenced others to the good. Bongani achieved this handsomely. It would be more fitting now for us all to reflect on how to promote his vision for improving health for all, and especially for the poor.

Emeritus Professor J P de V van Niekerk
(former Dean of the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Cape Town)
Cape Town, South Africa
jpvn@iafrica.com

S Afr Med J 2018;108(9):699. DOI:10.7196/SAMJ.2018.v108i9.13589