



LETTER FROM PIETERMARITZBURG

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29th October 2003

Aunt Ethel
 C/o The Aether
 Dear Aunt Ethel

MY NUMBER IS UP

The first victim, ironically, is a lawyer. Discovery Health has denied this long-standing patient any reimbursement for my fee, which he had already paid. They say that my practice number is 'not in use'.

I am writing to you on a formal letterhead. This shows that I have a South African medical degree and specialist qualification; and a UK specialist qualification. I am a Specialist Physician, registered as such with the Health Professions Council of South Africa. What is not shown is that I am registered as a specialist in General Medicine in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. I have received temporary specialist registration in New Zealand, and understand that permanent registration would be a formality. I am eligible to work as a specialist in Bahrain, Middle-East: and have practised in all these countries recently.

The letterhead also shows a practice number. I have had one since starting private practice 26 years ago: it occurred automatically. I have never paid for it: whereas one pays an annual subscription to maintain all the foregoing registrations. Some new practitioners did pay for theirs subsequently: hoodwinked by the predecessors of the Board of Health Funders, and not helped by the fact that Percy Mahlali, our Medical Association's last CEO, thought that doctors had to pay for their practice numbers! Our local Branch put him straight very vocally. However, the control freaks have persisted in their quest to dominate doctors and get annual payment from them. Our association, SAMA, has capitulated miserably to the enemy, the BHF, advising doctors that they should now pay for their numbers. I have not done so. My principle is that the contract is between doctor and patient, who is responsible for the fee. The patient deals with his medical aid fund, the third party. I, the doctor, do not do so. I am also in the fortunate position of not being entirely dependent on medical aid payments for my livelihood, nor indeed from private practice in South Africa. I wanted this matter to come to a head: so that patient, doctor, medical aid society, BHF and SAMA can see the practical consequences.

Simultaneously an excellent commentary by Dr A M Levin has appeared in Medical Chronicle on this very issue. He notes that doctors have an HPCSA number for identification and validation, and claims that they are being discriminated against by the relevant medical aid society and by the BHF. Hear, hear. More crucially though, the patient is being compromised and discriminated against. He has paid a subscription and has seen a doctor of his own choice. My patient was referred to me years ago!

What to do? I am seeing the patient today, and will discuss the matter – and give him a copy of this letter. I hope he will take up the cudgels with Discovery Health. I think the Constitutional Court should know about this: would a lawyer share my view? Maybe however, he should choose to attend another specialist who has paid for his practice number. And so, your Honour, seeing that I have no profit in my own land, perhaps I should close my small practice instead of building it up quietly, and earn all my income abroad. SAMA might maintain or even increase its membership if it fought successfully, albeit belatedly, on the doctors' behalf. The HPCSA, as Dr Levin urges, should do so too. One suspects otherwise.

I believe the prognosis for private medical practice in South Africa is very grave, and that this means that the future of the country's health service is in jeopardy. Doctors are much valued and in demand worldwide, my travels over the past three years have taught me. This is apparently not so in South Africa.

Yours affectionately but disconsolately

Robert-Ian

PS: Is this what is meant by tharting against funder?