



## USE TECHNOLOGY RESPONSIBLY, LETLAPE URGES



Dr Kgosi Letlape, Chairperson of the South African Medical Association (SAMA).

Proper early training of physicians on the appropriate use of diagnostics technology was vital while the money-spinning abuse of such equipment could lead to 'intolerable' health care costs as South Africans inevitably became more litigious.

This warning was sounded by Dr Kgosi Letlape, Chairperson of the South African Medical Association (SAMA) when he opened a well-received 1-day *in vitro* diagnostics forum in Johannesburg last month (4 October).

Speaking hours before departing for the annual World Medical Assembly congress in Japan, Letlape agreed that the advances made in diagnostic technology were very important. However, he said that unless these advances were accompanied by

continuing professional development and university training, more and more physicians would fall prey to the current 'misalignment of incentives' in the health care funding system.

'If you sit with a patient for an hour and can use your skill and the appropriate technology, this is not rewarded. But if you run them through a battery of tests before you even briefly see them – that is rewarded. This leads to inappropriate use and subsequent unaffordable costs to the system,' Letlape said.

With South Africa's limited resources it was vital that the health care system was self-sustaining and not disparate. Research was needed on the availability of diagnostic equipment in relation to population sizes, so that 'we can begin to ensure that ownership doesn't become a cost driver'.

Competition for patients often translated into the overuse of diagnostics technology.

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Sales people spoke of specific numbers of patients needed per year for a certain number of years in order to pay off the machine and profit.

However, 'if you're five patients short to pay it off, there's a real problem. If you're competing, you'll devise a means of over-using the machine,' he said.

Letlape said the USA model of health care simply did not work. Emulating it was self-defeating in a country that had 45% joblessness and 80% of its citizens without health care cover. If profit became the primary driver the health care industry would simply 'run out of consumers' as people died through systemic neglect. This would become 'an end game in itself'.

***Letlape said front-line providers urgently needed inexpensive, low-maintenance portable diagnostic resources that did not require complicated technical training.***

'When people are sick they are prepared to pay anything not to die. And we who are in the industry have a responsibility not to abuse that vulnerability. When people entrust their lives to us, we must understand that resources are not limitless. We have to work within those confines,' he added.

Letlape said front-line providers urgently needed inexpensive, low-maintenance portable diagnostic resources that did not require complicated technical training.

The government had made 'great strides' in clamping down on profiteering around diagnostics, as had the Health Professions Council with perverse incentive crackdowns.

'The promise of the trip to Mauritius for you and your wife and two friends when you buy diagnostic equipment is just not permissible any more,' he said.

Chris Bateman