



CARING ACCOLADES FOR TOP CLINICIANS

Two South Africans have been included in a line-up of 65 remarkable physicians hand-picked from 55 countries for profiling in a unique World Medical Association (WMA) book called *Caring Physicians of the World*.

Launched at the WMA annual assembly in Santiago, Chile in October, when current South African Medical Association Chairman, Dr Kgosi Letlape, was inducted as WMA President, the book is the brainchild of his WMA predecessor, Dr Yank Coble. Coble said the 'remarkable' stories in the book illustrated the patient-doctor relationship at its best, a relationship that was 'at the heart of everything we do as physicians'.

The profiles in the book were aimed at 'helping restore pride, passion, enthusiasm and optimism' among physicians who often worked under mounting pressure during political reform that put the doctor-patient relationship under increasing threat.

The two South Africans are Dr Mamphele Ramphele and Professor William Makgoba, both strident anti-apartheid activists who have since taken courageous stands for science and medicine in the face of AIDS denialism by the current government and criticised its often well-meaning but clumsier health initiatives.

Ramphele, currently co-chair of a Global Commission on International Migration, an independent 18-month commission of United Nations Secretary General Kofi Anan, rose from apartheid imprisonment and political banishment to become a director of the World Bank.

Creativity couldn't be banned

Along the way she established the Ithuseng Community Health Programme in the remote town of Lenyenye near Tzaneen, where she was banished to from the Eastern Cape for 7 years and became the first black woman to hold the vice-chancellorship

of a university (Cape Town), besides numerous other groundbreaking achievements. The WMA book says Ramphele, who holds 20 honorary doctorates, 'realised early on that by tapping into people's knowledge base one can make them agents for their own healing'.

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Makgoba, named several years ago as 'one of the leading African medical scientists of the 20th century', spent 8 years at the helm of the Medical Research Council, first as chairman and then as president, resisting government interference in explosive HIV/AIDS mortality findings and winning respect as a fiercely independent researcher. In spite of this he managed to triple the MRC budget and successfully argued for the MRC to give evidence to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission about its research conduct during the apartheid years.



Chairman of the South African Medical Association, Dr Kgosi Letlape.

The first African medical graduate to be awarded a Certificate of Merit in Medicine at the former Natal University, he was once described by Sir Raymon Hoffenberg, then president of the Royal College of Physicians of London, as 'one of the best five students I have had'. With a PhD in Human Immunogenetics, Makgoba has been instrumental in the transformation of higher education as vice-chancellor of KwaZulu-Natal University and a leading talent scout for and promoter of young African scientists. He initiated the South African AIDS Vaccine Initiative (SAAVI), aimed at conscientising his fellow scientists to focus on the country's highest national priority and involved the best brains from the private and public sector. SAAVI is now considered to be at the cutting edge of international scientific research and discovery.

Loyalty to principles before people

Of his outlook on life, Makgoba tells interviewers for the book, 'It is more important to make decisions based on principle than expediency and loyalty to people. Loyalty to ideas and knowledge is more important than loyalty to people, because carefully evaluated ideas and principles last longer as genuine friends of the mind and spirit than people do.'

The local pair take their place in the WMA book alongside such luminaries as Canada's Jack Armstrong, who dedicated his professional life to helping the country's aboriginals overcome adversity, John Awoonor-Williams of Ghana, who works in one of the remotest areas in the world as the only doctor serving a vast area, Francois Xavier Emanuelli of France, a co-founder of *Médecins sans Frontières* and Jacinto Convit, from Venezuela, who helped to eliminate leprosy.

In his inaugural address as President of the WMA, Letlape said physicians



were increasingly being professionally downgraded to select the least expensive treatment for their patients and expected to act as 'administrative clerks and accountants'. Globally, health care was being 'dumbed down to the lowest common denominator of cost', while rationing was slowly destroying the art and professional practice of medicine, the patient-physician relationship and patient access to all treatment options.

Put politics aside

Alluding to the recent spate of natural disasters across the world, Letlape, the first black ophthalmologist to qualify

in South Africa, said politics should not be allowed to stand in the way of the effective handling of epidemics or disasters.

Events had highlighted the need for physicians to become more effective in shaping the health policy environment, rather than being shaped by it. He saw the future role of the WMA as more that of social leaders and bemoaned the lack of a 'fully functional network where physicians and medical associations are directly linked to the World Health Organisation'.

Letlape cited SARS being transmitted from China to Taiwan and Taiwan not

having any formal channels open with the WHO to exchange technical data and provide help.

'Clearly we need to be more vocal as social leaders in making sure all measures can be taken to include all the peoples of the world in preparing for disasters,' he added.

Physicians chosen for the *Caring Physicians of the World* book were nominated by their own national medical associations and cited as examples of the profession's values, 'demonstrating the highest standards of medical care, ethics and science'.

Chris Bateman

VENUE CHANGE ANGERS HOSPITAL CHIEFS

Contrary to press reports, the constraints of a 'vital' British NGO and not the 'arrogant whim' of our Health Minister, forced some 90 public hospital CEOs to re-book their hotels and planes when their conference venue was suddenly changed.

The annual (hospital) Chief Executive Officers Forum Conference was to be held at the Royal Hotel in Durban, the only facility that could cater for the 100 participants on 21 and 22 October 2005, according to health department spokesman, Solly Mabotha. However, a 'vital' British NGO that gives best practice input in terms of a country-to-country memorandum of understanding with South Africa, could only make it to Johannesburg on 21 October, the day of the conference, he added.

With no direct flights between London and Durban, it was decided to inconvenience the 90 local CEOs rather than miss out on this input, and the much-maligned national health minister, Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, was not at fault, as reported.

'I was misquoted' – Mabotha

Mabotha was responding to press reports that quoted him as saying the minister

was 'a very busy woman', for whom it was more convenient to hold the conference in Pretoria.



Health Minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, at the National Health Summit held in Gauteng in December 2004. Alongside her is KwaZulu-Natal Health MEC, Peggy Nkonyeni.

The sudden venue change just over a week before the meeting angered several of the hospital CEOs deeply, one of whom described it as 'outrageous' and several others who reportedly called it 'pathetic, fruitless and wasteful'.

'This is certainly not best practice! About 100 people, including overseas guest speakers, had to make changes. You're talking about a lot of taxpayers' money here,' one unnamed CEO was quoted as telling the weekend newspaper.

Mabotha flatly denied the quotes attributed to him, which the reporter concerned stuck to when contacted by *Izindaba*. Said Mabotha, whom *Izindaba* managed to buttonhole after 2 days of trying, 'It sounded sensationalist for the reporter to say the minister was busy. It conveyed arrogance and would mean that she doesn't care and takes harsh wasteful decisions'.

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Instead, the service provider hired by the health department was forced to make the changes that had not cost the department anything in terms of booking