



HPCSA President 'embarrasses' delegation

Two eyewitnesses have described a series of incidents involving 'unpredictable and embarrassing' behaviour by the president of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) Dr Nicky Padayachee, during a top-level overseas trip.

They were members of a 'relationship building' delegation to Switzerland headed by the South African Minister of Science and Technology, Mosibudi Mangena, who subsequently ordered that arrangements be made for Padayachee to be flown home early. Padayachee resigned shortly afterwards as the Medical Research Council's Executive Director of Research for what he described as 'unrelated prior health and work load reasons'.

Izindaba launched an investigation following persistent rumours last year that Padayachee was displaying inappropriate and embarrassing behaviour that reflected poorly on several prominent positions he held.

Padayachee however, while conceding that his behaviour could be misconstrued, said a change in medication for a poorly diagnosed but persistent psychiatric condition was responsible for the two embarrassing episodes that *Izindaba* knows of. Fellow-delegates on the Swiss trip said he had to be 'propped up' at meetings at which he made 'inappropriate, impertinent and impolite' comments, struggled to find his seat, and was either late or failed to attend meetings.

The drama played out in full view of some of South Africa and Switzerland's most respected scientists in late June last year and ended only when the South African Embassy in Berne was asked to secure an early flight home for him.

South Africa was in Switzerland at the invitation of that country's Minister of Science and Technology, Dr Charles Kleiber, to 'identify opportunities to develop co-operative research and sign agreements on joint skills building projects'. Much of the trip was devoted to identifying training opportunities for promising young previously disadvantaged South African scientists – and Padayachee's track record in

'transforming' several major institutions, albeit controversial, was judged to be of value. He took part in his official MRC capacity.

Eye-witness accounts

A delegate who declined to be named, said that within days of the delegation's arrival, Padayachee proved to be an embarrassment. 'On some occasions he couldn't make it into the labs and sat down in the passage in full view of our hosts. He often looked faint and made quite a few creative remarks instead of speaking through our minister, which is the protocol.'

Izindaba launched an investigation following persistent rumours last year that Padayachee was displaying inappropriate and embarrassing behaviour that reflected poorly on several prominent positions he held.

Another delegate described Padayachee's behaviour as 'wayward – he appeared to be inebriated', adding 'I think his removal was justifiable'. Asked why he thought Padayachee was inebriated, he replied, 'you could smell the alcohol on his breath, he reeked of it'.

He added, 'he interrupted the minister and asked impertinent or impolite questions with the Swiss present – you didn't know what he would say when he opened his mouth,' he added.

Mission suffered

Approached for comment, Dr Chris Scheffer, Chief Director of Bi-Lateral International Relations for the department of science and technology, confirmed that Padayachee returned home early after 'not participating optimally in discussions'.

'I won't say that the mission was torpedoed by his absence or that it was a disaster, but it wasn't optimal in certain fields like the life science and human medical biology stuff where he could have helped,' he said.

Scheffer, who was there, said, 'he was often faint and had to be propped up in

the passage and struggled to find a seat. Sometimes he was late in the morning or retired early. One day he didn't appear in the afternoon at all'. Stressing that he was 'not a medical doctor', Scheffer said his 'general impression' was that Padayachee was 'not well', adding, 'you can interpret that in many senses. In the end we managed to collectively pull in things,' he said.

Scheffer confirmed that a worried Director General of Science and Technology, Dr Rob Adam, called him to ask 'what the situation was' in Berne.

Minister calls DG to arrange return

Approached by *Izindaba*, Adam said Mosibudi called him from Berne and told him 'this man is not well, please organise for him to come back'. Adam said he had 'heard he had some problems, so I called the person who was acting for MRC president, Anthony Mbewu, and said he was in trouble, could he organise that he comes home. I had no idea why he wasn't well. I didn't give it another thought after that'.

Ms Alice Makua, chief of staff in Mangena's office, confirmed to *Izindaba* that Mangena had asked for Padayachee to be sent home. She said Mangena told her to refer *Izindaba* to the Minister of Health, Dr Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, to whom the MRC was politically answerable. 'We just fund the MRC – our minister can only express disappointment,' she added.

No stranger to controversy

The incident is the latest in a string of controversies that have marked Padayachee's rise to prominence, initially as CEO of the Johannesburg City Council, then as Dean of Medicine at the University of Cape Town for just over a term. He replaced Mbewu as the MRC's Executive Director of Research (when Mbewu was appointed overall MRC chief) after leaving UCT.

Padayachee's appointment as President of the HPCSA, the country's top umbrella body for health care professionals, has many in the scientific and medical communities talking of 'government acolytes at any cost'.



Behind the scenes cover ups

'The question has to be asked, who is protecting him and why. He has a history of career problems but they always seem to be solved behind the scenes,' one said. A long-time UCT Faculty of Medicine member observed 'he was too sick to continue being our Dean but well enough to be President of the HPCSA – there has to be a reason'.

Padayachee's appointment as the first black Dean of Medicine at UCT 7 years ago proved deeply divisive. His powerful allies, who included then UCT Vice-Chancellor Dr Mamphela Ramphele, accused his detractors of racism when they opposed his appointment. He failed to secure the required two-thirds majority vote, but the faculty acquiesced 'in good faith' after forceful interventions by both Ramphele and her deputy, Wieland Gevers.

Senior faculty members subsequently made several unsuccessful attempts to have his confirmation as dean withdrawn during and after his routine probationary period.

Some senior UCT faculty members later resigned because of Padayachee's behaviour, some of it very public and embarrassing, and his reputation as an 'absentee dean'.

UCT 'final straw'

Ramphele's successor, Professor Njabulo Ndebele, persuaded Padayachee to resign within months of his appointment for a second term, the final straw, according to medical students at the time, being his behaviour at their 2004 graduation ceremony.

By his own admission, Padayachee struggled to read the names of graduates and was unsteady on his feet.

A deputy vice chancellor at UCT, Professor Martin Hall (Ndebele was unavailable) said Padayachee resigned 'for personal reasons', after taking a sabbatical. He declined to comment on the graduation ceremony incident.

Top academics, physicians and scientists spoken to by Izindaba expressed amazement at how Padayachee has managed to continue occupying top posts for so long. 'It's not so much about his behaviour or track record, but

about the continued compromising of the credibility of the offices and institutions he represents,' one top academic said.

'Manto's friend'

Padayachee is a close political ally and friend of Health Minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang. When the SA Universities Vice-Chancellors' Association withdrew his candidature from the HPCSA board in April last year (after he left UCT), Padayachee was promptly reappointed by Tshabalala-Msimang as one of her nominees.



Dr Nicky Padayachee.

Professor Mapule Ramashala, the chairperson of the MRC board, is another close friend of the Health Minister, and was instrumental in Mbewu's appointment as president. Mbewu has consistently towed the political line for Tshabalala-Msimang, often brooking strong disapproval from his scientific colleagues with carefully worded statements on the toxicity of nevirapine and other antiretroviral drugs.

A reluctant Mbewu confirmed that Padayachee resigned from his MRC post on 30 September last year, citing 'internal matters'. When *Izindaba* observed that this was 'a bit obtuse', he replied, 'it's supposed to be'. When the Swiss saga was related to Mbewu, he replied, 'I don't want to comment on any of that'. Asked where Padayachee was now working, he replied, 'I'd be interested to hear'.

President until 2009

Padayachee was inducted as HPCSA President by Tshabalala-Msimang in May 2004.

His term expires in May 2009. The council is a statutory body designed

to protect the public by maintaining excellent standards of ethical and professional practice. It is also responsible for 'establishing mechanisms and procedures for the early identification of impairment in students and practitioners and overseeing the implementation of treatment programmes for them'.

Soon after his induction, Padayachee called for stronger disciplinary action against errant practitioners, incensing several members of the Medical and Dental Professions Board, which ordered him to appear before them to explain his comments, extracting a half-hearted public apology which they eventually allowed to pass.

'It was the medicine'

Approached for comment, Padayachee said, 'I don't take alcohol at all because it reacts very badly with the medication which affects the speech section of my brain and causes slurring and unsteadiness. I can see how they would say I was under the influence'.

Because of the medication and a 'very bad eye infection', he had spent much of the Swiss trip in his hotel room, attending only a few meetings, he said. Upon his return home he spent 8 days in hospital under psychiatric observation but was now confident he could carry out his official responsibilities. He had made it clear to the MRC from the outset that his tenure was conditional upon his health.

Asked why he thought Padayachee was inebriated, he replied, 'you could smell the alcohol on his breath, he reeked of it'.

'I found myself doing the job of three executive directors and running between Jo'burg, Cape Town and Pretoria and I wasn't coping. I gave notice before the Switzerland trip which I went on at very short notice and against the advice of my psychiatrist. There was pressure because no one else at the MRC was available to go,' he added.

Chris Bateman