

The struggle for health services in Lenasia

This article was written by members of the Hospital Campaign Committee. It outlines the need for health services in their constituency and the campaign launched to assert health and health care as basic rights.

Historical background

Since the establishment of Lenasia, a number of community organisations have made representations to the hospital authorities calling for a hospital in Lenasia.

On 1 August 1963, JISWA (Johannesburg Indian Social Welfare Society) wrote to the Director of Health Services outlining this need. The need was seen as so urgent that in 1967 the Valliama Trust was prepared to donate a sum in excess of R30 000 towards the hospital.

In 1969, a delegation from JISWA was assured that a hospital would be built in the near future. Another three years went past before

The community was informed that geological tests were being undertaken to establish the suitability of the selected sites. The sites were said to be unsuitable for the building of the hospital and thereafter there was a deafening silence from the authorities. After challenges and confrontation from the community a site was finally allocated in June 1976. However, by 1980, no further steps were taken to build the hospital.



The unopened Lenasia Hospital: Parking place but no one to visit

In June 1980, a letter and petition with 13 083 signatures was sent to the Minister of Health, Welfare and Pensions stressing the urgency for health and medical services in Lenasia.

The hospital was completed in 1986 and was scheduled to have opened in October 1986. The residents were then informed that it was rescheduled to open on 1 April 1988.

The authorities are now saying that there are staffing difficulties and no funds to administer the hospital.

A meeting of a number of organisations from the community was held earlier this year. The meeting was attended by representatives from over 50 organisations. A Hospital Committee consisting of 21 people was formed.



The only available health clinic in the area is inaccessible to many elderly people and to those without their own transport

Existing health services in Lenasia

The following existing services indicate the inadequacy of the present services in meeting with the needs of the community.

One outpatient polyclinic

This clinic operates from Monday to Friday 8.00 am to 4.00 pm with no services for acute medical care outside 'office' hours. It has no provision for childbirth after hours and weekends and has no specialist service. The clinic is situated in Ext. 5, an affluent area, far away from the poorer areas such as Ext 2, 10, 11 where the greatest need exists. Furthermore, the state has failed to provide transport for the community to reach this facility.

Preventative services

For extensions 1-7, this service is provided by the City of Johannesburg and consists of a Chief Medical Officer, a Nursing Officer, 4 public health nurses and other health workers.

For extensions 8-11 and Lenasia South these services are virtually non-existent and no facilities have been built. These residents are paying more rates and taxes than Ext 1-7 residents. Presently there is 1 nursing sister for this area (8-11 and Lenasia South). Many residents are knocking at the doors of the Johannesburg Clinic for immunisations.

From the above it is clear that the present health services are grossly inadequate and in a crisis situation.



The Hospital Committee has formulated its demands around the Freedom Charter

Hardships experienced by the community

People have to travel about 32km to Coronation or Hillbrow hospitals in the event of an emergency. The only clinic is situated in an area which is inaccessible to the poorer section of the population. The following are some responses from people who were randomly interviewed about their experiences:

"My mother was in great pain and my dad rushed her to Coronation Hospital. They refused to admit her, saying that she must go to Hillbrow hospital. But we made a big fuss and they eventually admitted her. Its not the hospital staff's fault, but ridiculous government policy," Anonymous.

"I think the worst problem is emergencies at night. How does one get hold of an ambulance? By the time you get from Lenz to the nearest hospital, it may be too late," Sanjit Hari.

What the state should be providing

Curative services

These are the responsibility of the Transvaal Provincial Administration. They entail hospital services for the care of the sick and injured within 5km of residence. For a population estimated to be in the region of 300 000 (Greater Lenasia and environs ie. Klipspruit West, Mid-Ennerdale, Grasmere, Finetown, Eldorado Park, Univalle and Lenasia) the norm would be:

- hospitals: (100-400) beds, operating 24 hours per day, 7 days a week, open on public holidays and providing facilities for emergencies, accidents, intensive care and child birth;
- mental health services: provided on a 24 hour basis, 7 days a week, including provision for the hospitalisation of the acutely ill patient;
- geriatric services: health care for the elderly including a frail care centre for those who may have for eg. suffered a stroke and are unable to look after themselves at home;
- dental services: 24 hours, 7 days per week;
- ambulance services: a 24 hour service available in the area, that can respond within minutes.

Preventive and community services

- immunisation against Polio, TB and other infectious diseases;
- child health and feeding scheme for malnourished children;
- family planning service;
- screening for diseases such as cancer of the cervix, diabetes and high blood pressure;
- providing advice, health information and support services such as rehabilitation for persons having suffered a heart attack;
- treatment of patients suffering from sexually transmitted diseases.

All the above services are to be provided free, being financed from rates and taxes.

The present campaign

The present campaign began with the JISWA writing to the Director of Hospital Services inquiring about the hospital in Lenasia South which was lying unused for almost 2 years. The response from the authorities concerned was that they did not have funds to commission the hospital. The present campaign was launched at a meeting on the 24 March 1988. It was attended by at least 50 organisations within the community.

At this meeting the following demands were outlined:

- the immediate opening of the Lenasia South Hospital;
- the establishment of a comprehensive curative and preventative health service for the community, as the 98 bed hospital cannot meet the total needs of the community;
- a non-racial hospital which should serve the people of Lenasia, Eldorado Park, Ennerdale, Finetown and Grasmere;
- the rejection of privatisation.

A committee consisting of 21 persons was formed. In addition the meeting resolved that the Lenasia South Hospital be opened immediately to all the people of Lenasia and the surrounding areas.

The authorities, together with the authentic representatives of the community and relevant health worker groups, should plan and structure future health care facilities on a non-racial and non-discriminatory basis.

The first phase of the campaign was the petition calling for the opening of the hospital. The campaign slogan was "Open our hospital now! Health care is a basic right!". A newsletter, detailed coverage through the media, stickers and posters formed part of the campaign.

A mass meeting was set for 6 July 1988 where the first phase of the campaign was presented to the community for discussion and direction. At the same time, representatives of the community are exploring the suggestion that legal action be instituted against the authorities for failing to provide the community with essential health services.

Conclusion

The active participation of community organisations together with progressive health worker organisations is what we are striving for - not only for better health services but also for a non-racial, democratic South Africa.

The Freedom Charter on Health states the following:

A preventive health scheme should be run by the state.

Free medical care and hospitalisation shall be provided by the state for all, with special care for mothers and young children.

The aged, the orphans, the disabled and the sick shall be cared for by the state.

Health care is a basic right!