

Hospitals in rural South Africa

Homelands: poor conditions, poor health

Approximately 14 million people live in the ten areas called homelands. The majority of these people live in rural areas and their health is linked to the socio-economic conditions in these areas. Diseases of poverty are reported to be the major reasons for the admission of children to rural hospitals. The attempt to make homelands independent, is an attempt on behalf of the government to get rid of its responsibility for providing a health service to meet the needs of all South Africans.

Homeland health budgets

In spite of the greater proportion of ill-health in rural areas, the homeland health budgets are very much less than for white and urban South Africans.

In 1984/5, only 12,7% of the R3,2 billion health budget was allocated to the 42,7% of South Africa's population living in the homelands.

Homeland health services

Health services and other social services that influence the health of this population, are underdeveloped. Each of the ten homelands has its own ministry of health so that South Africa has in total fourteen different departments of health. This results in a top heavy and expensive bureaucracy with duplication and inadequate co-ordination of services and costs.

Community health services come under the authority of a hospital of the same homeland. This is the reason why many clinics have no formal links with their nearest hospital, even though patients are still referred there. Sick people tend to ignore homeland boundaries, using whichever hospital is nearest. As the hospital in one homeland may not interfere in the domain of another homeland, there is often no follow up of patients who go into another homeland. A hospital is not allowed to see a sick child at a clinic, or do a home visit, if the child comes from another homeland or from non-homeland South Africa, resulting in a breakdown in patient care and cost inefficiencies.



St Barnabas - a hospital in rural Transkei

Numbers of hospital beds in homeland hospitals

The ratio of hospital beds is 1,6 per 1000 in the homelands compared with 2,5 beds per 1000 blacks and 4,8 per 1000 whites in the rest of South Africa. In 1985, twenty-four homeland hospitals ran at greater than 100% occupancy with patients sharing beds or sleeping on the floor. Facilities are often very limited with serious equipment shortages. There are also severe staff shortages.

Health worker: population ratio in the homelands

The doctor : population ratio ranges from about 1:10 000 to 1:40 000. Because most medical students come from urban middle class families and their medical education does not encourage working in rural areas, most doctors opt for a more lucrative and high technology practice in urban areas. Similarly, there are 1,4 nurses per 1000 population in the six non-independent homelands compared with 6,8 in the major towns.