

# Harsh findings on cancer patients' rights welcomed

**Nosipho Mngoma**

THE damning findings of a SA Human Rights Commission report on the violation of cancer patients' rights to access health care in KwaZulu-Natal, has been cautiously welcomed by organisations which have been calling for concrete, life-saving action.

The commission and the complainant, the DA, will release the full report today.

DA KZN spokesperson on health Dr Imran Keeka said although his party welcomed the commission's recommendations detailed in a press release last week, it remained to be seen how the government would react in implementing them.

"We can't have a protectionist attitude from the premier, health minister and the ANC towards (Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni) Dhlomo. That is what has been going on all along, with the issue playing

out in the public domain with exposé after exposé being ignored," he said.

It was the DA which filed the complaint in February last year with the commission regarding the negative impact of insufficient radiotherapy treatment devices and facilities in the province.

The commission's findings indicated that patients had in certain cases waited for more than 10 months for treatment.

The commission interviewed staff and patients, inspected Addington and Inkosi Albert Luthuli Central hospitals and sought responses from Dhlomo and the department.

Among its responses to the commission, the department blamed human resource constraints, saying it did not have enough oncologists.

However, Mary de Haas of the Medical Rights Advocacy Network rubbished this, saying oncologists only left the

department because they could not do their jobs due to faulty equipment.

"That is a callous thing to say. Most of the oncologists worked at these public hospitals for years, we have just lost the almost last lot of oncologists, but this has been going on for years."

De Haas said she would wait to see how damning the report was and if the commission had enough "bite" to resolve the oncology crisis "which has cost lives".

"I suspect we will see a blame game, there will be sacrificial lambs, but constitutionally the whole executive is responsible for this. It has been a huge dereliction of duty on the part of the department which is led by a doctor.

"It makes it worse for me that Dr Dhlomo and the minister Dr (Aaron) Motsoaledi, being doctors, took the medical (Hippocratic) oath, yet the consequences of their actions are

that people are dying. It's gross government culpability," said De Haas.

The commission called on Premier Willies Mchunu to investigate whether Dhlomo had discharged his constitutional and statutory responsibilities for the provision of health care to cancer patients, and report back within 10 days of receiving the report.

Bishop Abel Gaba of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference Justice and Peace Commission said the department owed it to patients to respond in a manner which shows it cares for cancer sufferers.

Lorraine Govender, the national advocacy co-ordinator for the Cancer Association of South Africa, said the association remained extremely concerned about future oncology treatment in the public sector in the province.

She said it was a shame that

it had to take a Chapter Nine institution to call for action for the lives of cancer patients to matter to the department.

"(We) remain hopeful that there will be measures put in place to ensure there are oncology specialists to assist with treatment," she said.

While the department did not respond directly to the findings of the commission yesterday, it maintained that bringing in oncologists from the private sector was part of interim plans to continue providing health care to cancer patients.