

# Medical Professionals and Hospital Management

*Jocelyne Kane-Berman*

*In South Africa today, many senior administrative positions are filled by doctors. They have been promoted to those positions without necessarily having adequate skills to provide effective management. Some people have argued that senior administrative posts should be held by professional managers rather than medical personnel. Others, however, believe that doctors should be trained to manage hospitals.*

*Critical Health asked Dr. Kane-Berman to comment on, amongst other things, whether there is a crisis in hospitals in South Africa; the degree to which problems at hospitals are the result of poor management; the training that is needed to develop adequate administrators; and, more specifically, whether medical or non-medical personnel should provide administrative and management leadership at hospitals.*

## Hospitals in Crisis

It has been stated on many occasions that health care in South Africa - particularly in hospitals, more specifically academic hospitals - is in crisis. The blame is frequently laid at the door of management, or rather lack of management skills. There is undoubtedly a crisis in health care and in hospitals, but there are a number of reasons for this crisis.

With regard to state hospitals, the problems are, in broad terms: lack of resources, maldistribution of resources, excessive utilisation of scarce resources by the private sector, fragmentation of health services, over-regulation of the public sector, and inadequate preventive, promotive, curative and rehabilitative facilities for health care provision at the primary level.

As a result, state hospitals are inadequately funded, staffed and equipped and are overburdened. Excessive demand for services at secondary and tertiary levels has led to lengthening waiting lists, declining quality, dissatisfaction from patients and loss of morale amongst staff. The latter has led to a flight of personnel to the private sector or overseas,

resulting in a further deterioration in service - a downward spiral. In this environment, the lack of administrative or management skills is one small contributory factor.

## **Lack of Training for Health Administrators**

Unlike many other countries, South Africa has not, until relatively recently, perceived the need for specific training courses for health service administrators. The departments of community medicine in the seven medical faculties have tried to fill this vacuum since the late 1970s. They have provided training primarily for medical graduates, although other health care professionals have been accepted for post-graduate training. These efforts have not, however, met the major needs for management skills for the various aspects of health service management.

The nursing service has also developed administrative courses for their members, but these have been exclusive and have not contributed significantly to the mainstream of health service administration.

There is, however, a small corps of well trained, capable hospital administrators in service. Their best efforts do not, unfortunately, contribute effectively to better state hospital management, because of the existence of other inhibiting factors which contribute to the hospital crisis.

## **Management Training**

There is undoubtedly a great need for specific training for medical and other health workers in management theory and practice. The Medical Administrators Group of the Medical Association of South Africa have drawn up a curriculum for the training of medical administrators, which incorporates many of the subjects offered by graduate schools of business. These must be combined with courses offered by departments of community medicine, to ensure comprehensive training and the acquisition of the necessary knowledge and skills. Schools of public health which have been set up, for instance, at the University of the Western Cape, also have a role to play in training various categories and levels of health workers in health service management.

The availability of these courses will, in time, make a significant contribution to more cost effective and efficient management of South African hospitals - provided that other problems are also addressed.



State hospitals: badly funded, understaffed and equipped and overburdened. *Photo: The Star*

## Medical Professionals for Management

In other countries, notably the United States of America, there is currently an awakening recognition of the need for doubly qualified medical managers in hospitals. There is greater appreciation of the important role which administrators, drawn from the ranks of medical professionals, can play in bridging the communication gap between medical and other health care professionals and hospital administration.

Medical administrators are better able to absorb conflict, to facilitate co-operation and to engender multidisciplinary team development in hospitals than their lay, or non-medical, counterparts. They also have greater insight into medical ethics, needs and thought processes and are better able to qualitatively and quantitatively assess medical demands for resources. Medical administrators are also able to provide leadership for their peers and colleagues which lay administrators are less able to do, due, in part, to the perceived status of medical practitioners in the hospital hierarchy.



## Harnessing Skills under Medical Managers

Hospitals, particularly academic hospitals, are extraordinarily complex organisations and require a wide variety of management skills, including accounting, law, industrial relations, human resource development, engineering and information technology. Experts in these fields should be brought into the hospital environment to enhance the management team of doctors, nurses and other administrators. Such multidisciplinary teams could ensure major improvements in hospital management in this country, but their expertise needs to be harnessed, under the leadership of medical administrators, to ensure high quality, goal directed patient care.

Obviously the variety of skills and the number of expert individuals required for the cost effective management of hospitals depends on the size and complexity of the organisation. The most cost effective mechanism for managing a hospital of any size is, however, the utilisation of appropriately qualified medical administrators who, with adequate training, can ensure a degree of expertise in all the essential fields of hospital management.

Many issues need to be addressed before the crisis in hospital and health care in South Africa can be resolved. Excessively burdensome public service regulations must be eliminated. Responsibility and authority must be delegated to health care regions and hospitals in a unified health care system. Resources must be equitably distributed and primary health care services upgraded to ensure accessible, available, affordable, acceptable health care for all. When these requirements have been met, cost effective and efficient hospitals - managed by appropriately qualified medical administrators, in conjunction with other managers - will be able to meet the needs of the community for high quality secondary and tertiary level public sector health care.

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