

WHY KILL

A BLACK MEDICAL SCHOOL ?

by E. G. Malherbe

It is with a sense of shock that the Natal Medical School, on the eve of its celebrating its Silver Jubilee, learned of the Government's intention to phase it out as a medical school for training Black practitioners.

By all means let the Government establish another medical school for Blacks, as it now intends to do in the Transvaal. Heaven knows, we badly need more African doctors. In South Africa there is only one African doctor for every 44 000 Africans, as compared with one Indian doctor for every 900 Indians, and one White doctor for every 400 White people.

But why kill off an institution that was established a quarter of a century ago, and has ever since grown not only in numbers, but also in reputation? To date it has produced over 600 Non-White doctors of whom over one-third were Africans.

Even during its early stages, our Medical School in Durban was visited by experts from all parts of Africa in order to learn from us how to start and run a Medical School for their indigenous populations.

Durban, with all its variegated population groups, White, Coloured, Indian and African, who have different living and food habits, and live within a radius of twenty miles of the city, provides a human laboratory for medical research, almost unique in the world. This fact by itself attracted medical men of outstanding ability to come and work in our Medical School.

In addition, the presence of many specialists in this city afforded part-time teaching staff of high quality such as would not be available in a medical school situated in an African Homeland.

The new medical school for Africans is to be called MEDUNSA (The Medical University of South Africa). It will be situated about forty kilometres outside Pretoria, and will be erected at a cost of about thirty million rand. If their medium of instruction is to be Afrikaans, in view of the fact that it is situated in an area where Afrikaans is generally spoken, what about those Blacks from KwaZulu and from the Transkei who do not speak Afrikaans at all? When it concerns White university students the Government makes a fetish of mother-tongue medium. The Government has no scruples, however, about pushing this hallowed principle into the background when it concerns Non-Whites. For

example, the English-speaking Coloureds of Natal are virtually forced to attend the Afrikaans-medium university for Coloureds in the Cape. They are not allowed by law to attend the English-medium university for Indians or the White university in Durban.

The Intake

Let us look at the potential intake of suitable African applicants. Already there are more than can be accommodated. The number of Africans who pass matriculation examination with full qualifications for university entrance has risen from a little over 300 to over 2 000 in the last ten years. The number who qualified in mathematics at the matriculation examination (mathematics being an essential for admission to medical school) increased from 201 in 1965 to 1 601 in 1974. Out of these 1 601 academically qualified matriculants, 172 applied for admission in 1975 to the pre-medical courses and were qualified for entry into our Medical School. In the two previous years, the number of qualified applicants was over 200. This number has been steadily growing. In fact, it has trebled in the last five years. In addition the Bantu universities recommend annually about 25 students for direct admission to the second medical year of study. It would seem therefore that if the potential intake of qualified applicants is any criterion, two medical schools for Africans will soon be required to accommodate them—quite apart from the crying need for more African doctors. So, why wipe out the existing one?

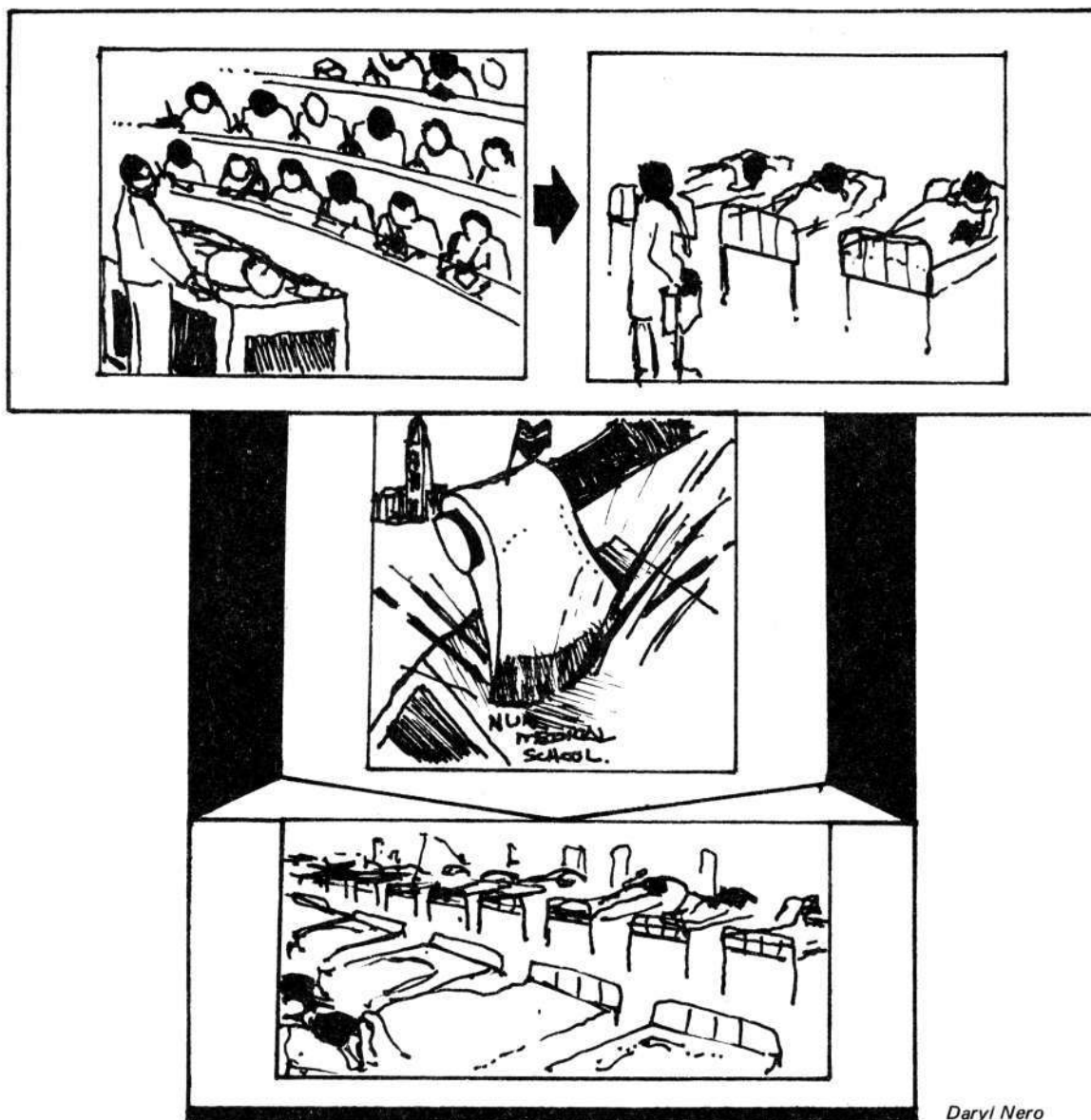
In 1975, there were, all told, 527 students in the Natal Medical School of whom 212 were Bantu. One wonders what is going to happen to the training of Indian and Coloured doctors.

Financial Aspect

It has been calculated that the Natal Medical School can increase its intake to 160, of whom 100 will be Bantu students, at a cost of only R450,000. At the present time of financial stringency, the question may be asked why, at this stage spend R30 000,000 on a new medical school for Africans when a slight extension of the Natal Medical School could in the meantime cater for the normal increase in African medical applicants, and do so at a much smaller cost to the taxpayer?

A Medical School for Whites in Durban

There are today in the Republic five medical schools for Whites—three Afrikaans (Pretoria, Stellenbosch and



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Bloemfontein) and two English-medium (Cape Town and Witwatersrand).

In the past the two last mentioned were the only medical schools in the Republic. In 1943 Pretoria, and in 1957, Stellenbosch began. In the late 1960's Bloemfontein followed.

For a considerable time Cape Town and Witwatersrand Medical Schools have been so overcrowded that they had to turn away large numbers of qualified applicants. An urgent need thus arose for a third English-medium medical school. Instead, a third Afrikaans medical school at Bloemfontein was given priority at a time when there was ample room for qualified applicants in the two existing Afrikaans-medium medical schools.

Some Back History

As far back as 1928, Professor L. W. Bews, the first Principal of the Natal University College, included the establishment of a medical school in Durban as part of the programme of university development in Natal. In 1938 a

Government Commission consisting of medical men under the chairmanship of Professor M. C. Botha and myself as secretary, recognised the claims which Durban had for a third medical school by virtue of its unrivalled clinical material. However, to meet the needs of the increasing number of Afrikaans-medium students at the time, it recommended that priority be given to Pretoria for the third medical school. Durban would, however, be considered as a suitable centre where a beginning could be made for training Non-White doctors.

In fact, as far back as 1922, a private school for training Bantu doctors had already been started by Dr J. B. McCord and Dr Alan B. Taylor in Durban. This training which was given in connection with the Non-White McCord Hospital, was not recognised by the medical authorities and had to be abandoned. Dr Taylor was destined in later years to play a large part in eventually obtaining a medical school for Durban and acted as Dean during the first difficult years until he was succeeded in 1952 by Professor G. W. Gale as full-time Dean of the Medical Faculty of the University of Natal.

This was achieved after prolonged negotiations with the Government which began in 1945 and in which Dr H. Gluckman, Chairman of the National Health Services Commission, played a prominent part in supporting the establishment of a medical school in Durban. In this, Durban had the backing also of the Federal Council of the Medical Association. In 1947 the Union Government agreed.

The National Party Government which came into power in 1948 confirmed this decision on condition that Whites would not be registered. Negotiations with the Natal Provincial Administration enabled the Medical Faculty to make use of King Edward VIII Hospital for training purposes and also for a joint medical service. The first medical students qualified in 1957. Until recently, the course was seven years, the first years of which included the humanities and social sciences in addition to the natural sciences. This enrichment of the non-white medical practitioners' educational background proved beneficial to the medical profession.

Durban, with its many hospitals, is so rich in the variety of clinical material, that it could easily carry a second medical school; that is another English-medium medical school in the University of Natal. Clinically, Durban is far better off than either Bloemfontein or Stellenbosch for material on which to train students. In these two centres, the medical student has to scratch around to get enough practical experience to fulfil the requirement of handling twenty maternity cases before taking the final examination in Obstetrics and Gynaecology. In the King Edward VIII Hospital in Durban alone, over twenty-two tons of babies are born a year. Bantu students had often handled as many as 200 deliveries each by the time they got to their final year. External examiners from Cape Town and Witwatersrand testified that these men were so well versed in all the possible complications that can occur when babies are born, that there was hardly a question, even regarding abnormal cases, that these Bantu students could not answer.

Durban could easily accommodate two medical schools. As a result of many years of operating in two centres, Pietermaritzburg and Durban, the University of Natal has had sufficient experience in administering two science faculties and two arts faculties, and should have no difficulty in administering two medical faculties, one for White students and one for Black students, as long as this idea of racial segregation is insisted upon by the Government. The expert experience of the University of Natal in starting and running

a medical school should be capitalised and not written off by the stroke of a pen.

I don't think that those bureaucratic pundits in Pretoria who want to kill the Natal Medical School and who seem to be able to get all the money they need for a new medical school, have the foggiest idea what it involves to start and build up such an institution from scratch. They seem to think that it is merely a matter of buildings which can be erected at Government expense in a Bantu Homeland. They do not seem to realise that an institution like the Natal Medical School is an organic growth, with its roots in the human environment. Besides developing the external facilities like buildings and laboratories, it involves the creation of human relationships, based on delicate negotiations with bodies like the Provincial Council, Local Municipality and the Medical Association, not to mention the efforts put in by dedicated individuals. These are services which money cannot buy.

It is unthinkable that all this must now be wiped out by a Ministerial fiat from Pretoria. Why? Why?

Once more it seems to be a case of officials pandering to an ethnic ideology of separation with which the Government is obsessed, but which is totally irrelevant to medical practice, and insensitive to the health and welfare of those human beings who need it most. Disease recognises no ethnic barriers between English and Afrikaans or between Black and White people living in the same country. Neither should medical training and practice do so.

P.S. Since this was written the new Minister of National Education, Dr Piet Koornhof, on January 30th postponed the ill-considered **verbot** against registering first year African students at the Natal Medical School for this year.

It would seem that this respite is due to financial considerations about embarking on the new R30 million venture in the Transvaal at a time when there is the general call about restricting capital expenditure in the public as well as in the private sector. What ever the case may be, it illustrates even more the precipitate way the Government can embark on a project when it forms part of the grand policy of ethnic separation. The University of Natal was not consulted despite its 25 years of experience in training black doctors. □