



**MEC Dr. Bandile Masuku Keynote Address at the African
Traditional Medicine DAY Celebration Programme, 30
August 2019, Saulsville Arena, Tshwane**

***“Integration of traditional medicine in the curricular of
health sciences students in universities in the African
region.”***

Sanibonani, Dumelang, Good afternoon, Thokozani boGogo
nabo Mkhulu!

It is a great honour for me to be here today to celebrate this very
important day in Africa’s calendar. The 31st August marks a very
important day for medical sector, specifically those practicing in
traditional medicine.

This date marks almost twenty years since the 50th World Health
Organisation (WHO) African Region Office met in Ouagadougou

in 2001 where African Health Ministers took a decision to celebrate African Traditional Medicine on the 31st August of each year.

This step, although delayed was a re-enforcement of the WHO's Alma-Ata declaration of its 1978 Primary Health Care conference that recognised the role of traditional practitioners to work as a part of the health team and to respond to health needs of the community (WHO Alma-Ata Declaration VII, section 7).

It is important to recognise that while the international community acknowledged traditional medicine only in the 18th century, the history of traditional medicine goes far beyond this. Many generations have passed through our indigenous healing practices and medicines. Before colonialism in South Africa, African people of all tribal groups relied on traditional medicines and myths around traditional practices were not pronounced.

It is therefore very important that we recognise how colonialism not only fragmented our society, but also our culture and identity. The infiltration of the West in Africa has significantly delegitimised African culture, and our traditional medicine. It has also successfully undermined and oppressed the practice and practitioners, presenting it as witchcraft and having no place in modern society.

The reality is that approximately 80% of Africa's population is dependent on traditional medicine for their basic health needs. Considering that Africa has a significantly rural population, in many cases traditional medicine is the only healthcare service that is easily accessible and affordable.

This reality alone is enough to make the point that there is a wealth of knowledge that African traditional medicine can contribute to existing health systems not only in Africa, but globally as well.

Within the medical discipline in general, there is a notable shift towards spirituality, including the use of organic and herbal medicines. Researchers, Scientists and medical practitioners in different parts of the world are going back to nature to source solutions for some of the most complex medical illnesses and diseases.

The important question to ask however, is '*How much voice indigenous traditional practitioners have in this shifting discourse?*' It is important that the traditional medicine fraternity talks about how they can protect their knowledge systems, while advancing medicine and practice such that it makes contributions to the health sector.

There is a need for an advancement, and normalisation of traditional practices and systems especially as it relates to societal perceptions around the credibility and capacity of traditional medicines to heal and remedy illnesses.

The key thing in this respect is to de-colonise the thinking around healthcare and also elevate African traditional medicines within academic and Health Science discussions. The call for an integration of African medicine into the Health Sciences curriculum in the African region is one that is important and overdue.

The fixation on western medical practices deprives us the opportunity to explore the potential that exists in traditional medicine. This fixation also restricts innovation and narrows the understanding of disease – it's distribution, control and other factors relating to health.

As the government of this country we support, and firmly believe that traditional medicine has a role to play in strengthening our provision of primary health care. This is anchored in the

understanding that Africa has capacity to develop African solutions to its problems.

We also acknowledge that the integration of traditional practices in the academy can offer an opportunity for us to develop an African understanding of the mental health phenomenon which is fast becoming an epidemic. An integrated approach to addressing some of the major health challenges such as this is critical and must include a strong voice from all traditional practitioners.

As Traditional Medicine Practitioners in South Africa, it is therefore important to deliberate among yourselves about the role that traditional medicine plays in our current healthcare system, and also about the new perspectives and approaches to treatment and care that you could bring to health care, especially in the public health system.

At the centre of this is also, a discussion about what processes need to unfold in order to integrate traditional practices into the health sector. This is a discussion that includes ways of identifying and establishing a set of norms and standards that can be used to regulate and ensure that quality health services are being provided to the public.

It is not a secret that the traditional medicine fraternity is also delegitimised by some who undermine human rights and participate in criminal activity under the banner of traditional practices. Setting up proper regulatory systems will be important to differentiate criminals from legitimate healers. This must as such form part of the discussions on curriculum development and upholding ethics in medicine.

As I am speaking here today, I know that other traditional practitioner groups will soon come knocking on our doors complaining about preferential treatment that some enjoy over

others. I must be honest and say that - this kind of fragmentation not assist the call to integrate traditional medicine into mainstream health care discourse.

As traditional practitioners, it is also important that you consolidate yourselves and form a united front towards the integration of traditional medicine into the health curriculum and health system as a whole.

It is important that you take lessons from the book of South African history, that tells us that because of division sown among South African tribes by the coloniser, today we are still engaging in a programme of bringing back land to its original owners. It would be a shame for traditional medicine to lose its originality, and ownership by Africans because of failure to unite as practitioners.

Before I close, allow me to also take this opportunity to briefly highlight the areas that the Gauteng Department of Health has prioritised for the sixth administration.

- National Health Insurance
- Improved Patients Experience of Care
- Clinical Services
- Health Education and Health Promotion
- Governance and Leadership

NHI

Firstly, it is important to emphasise that National Health Insurance is primarily a funding model that is a vehicle towards the attainment of universal health coverage. There is international consensus that universal health coverage must be the standard for all countries in the world. While models may differ across the different countries, the commitment to attaining the third Sustainable Development Goal – Ensuring healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages must underpin all countries health interventions.

Improving Primary Healthcare

Secondly, the successful implementation of the National Health Insurance will rest upon a strong primary healthcare system in the province. Primary healthcare is the backbone of the health system anywhere in the world. The delivery of sound and proper primary healthcare services will help us reduce and manage the quadruple burden of disease, reduce congestion at our hospitals and save us money.

Improving patient experience of care

Thirdly, the department has also prioritised the improvement of patient experiences in our facilities. Our point of departure is that the quality of care in our facilities can only improve if we take care of our staff. We need to make sure that their working environment improves in terms of tools of trade, safety, infrastructure and well-being. We need healthcare workers who are inspired to save lives and consequently increase the fortunes of our country.

Partnerships

It is a priority for the department to partner with all health practitioners and private health clinics in ensuring that we turn around public healthcare in the province. An important aspect for us in this regard is the principle of going back to basics, which is essentially utilising one's skills and expertise for the improvement of the lives of others.

Leadership and Governance

As Gauteng, we are committed to improving leadership and governance in the province. A capable Gauteng Health Department will have a leadership with the right strategic orientation, high levels of ethical conduct and cutting-edge skills and knowledge.

We need to strengthen our clinical, financial performance and policy governance. We must rebuild our systems and ensure compliance. Much as there will be rewards, there will also be consequences. We are committed to raising the bar and ensuring that public healthcare is not negatively impacted by non-compliance to the standards of a clean, robust and efficient government.

Conclusion

There is a lot that needs to be done to bring credibility to our public health system. As traditional practitioners in Gauteng, it is important that you also consider ways that you can assist the department to achieve their priorities. Although some of the identified priorities may not speak directly to the framework of traditional health practices today, it is important that you are familiar with departmental priorities as players in the sector.

Most important however is your participation in the government consultations and broader discussions around the NHI. Specifically doing this from a point of view that understands that the NHI will offer an opportunity for traditional practitioners to be accommodated in our facilities, and also for traditional medicines to form part of the list of medicines available under the NHI.

The integration of traditional practices and medicines into mainstream health care will require that traditional practitioners are united in voice on health issues including how as a country we should wage a war on diseases that are destroying our nation. The voice of traditional medicine is important and should not be ignored or silenced.

We recognise that the celebration of the African Traditional Medicine Day - 30th August 2019 marks an important milestone in the long journey travelled towards realising the formal

recognition and institutionalisation of African Traditional Medicine in South Africa.

We have a long way to go in transforming our healthcare. You have an important role to play, I urge you all to consolidate your efforts and chart a way forward that will see to it that the future of medicine does not appropriate the core values, and practices of African Traditional Medicine.

Thank you.