

Barnard defies apartheid by hiring non-whites

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From PETER YOUNGHUSBAND

CAPE TOWN, Tuesday. — Dr Christiaan Barnard, the South African heart transplant pioneer, has caused a furore in Government circles here by employing coloured nurses to care for white patients in his cardiac unit at Groote Schuur Hospital.

Apartheid laws forbid non-white nurses to look after white patients, but Dr Barnard has brushed the rules aside because of a chronic nursing shortage and moved coloured nurses into his wards.

"If they (the Government) do not like it, they can go to hell," he said. "We here are in the business of saving lives and we can't dither around with idiotic laws that make no sense."

The fact that Dr Barnard runs his heart transplant unit in a State hospital makes his defiance more difficult for the authorities to take. But the Ministry of Health is unlikely to do anything about it.

Dr Barnard has calculated — correctly — that he is too well known internationally for the authorities to remove him from office, or tamper in any way with his transplant unit where heart

surgeons from many countries are studying under his tuition.

Dr Barnard moved in the coloured nurses a few days after he warned that the heart unit, where the first transplant operations were performed, would have to close because of the shortage of white nurses that has caused a serious disruption of medical services all over South Africa.

Dr Barnard has also suggested that to relieve the nursing shortage, young girls should be "conscripted" into hospitals after leaving school for a two-year period in the same way that white males are conscripted into the army.

The surgeon, whose arrogance and tetchiness, along with his brilliance, has made him a sort of John McEnroe of the South African medical profession, also tore into the medical profession as a whole.

He accused South African doctors of "lacking motivation and commitment" and of being interested only in money.

South African doctors as a whole "couldn't care less about standards and are always looking for the easy way out," he said.

This was leading to negligence and doctors' faults were "simply being swept under the bed."

Patients were no longer being properly examined, Dr Barnard said. Prescriptions were often given over the telephone by doctors without seeing the patient.

"In one recent case," he said, "a doctor referred a 'blue baby' to an orthopaedic specialist because it would not learn to walk."

Most South African hospital departments did not have meetings to discuss deaths and complications. This was standard practice in his department and in the United States.

There was no such system in South Africa and doctors' mistakes were hushed up.

Dr Barnard said people would be "astonished" to know how many deaths in hospitals were due to negligence on the part of doctors.

Medical men here have declined to comment on Dr Barnard's allegations.

One colleague at Groote Schuur said, somewhat wearily: "One could answer Professor Barnard point by point, but we have learned from experience that he needs this sort of vocal exercise. It makes him feel good — like a run in the morning or a game of tennis."