

76TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS OF NKONJENI HOSPITAL

**MESSAGE OF CONGRATULATIONS BY
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MAHLABATHINI: OCTOBER 19, 2001

The Master of Ceremonies, Mr R Khumalo; The Rt Rev Bishop L Sibiya, the Bishop of the Eastern Diocese of the Lutheran Church; The Rt Rev Bishop S P Zulu, the retired Bishop of the Lutheran Church and other Ministers of Religion present; the Inkosi's Deputy, Mr S Ndlovu and other amaKhosi present; the Honourable Minister of Health of KwaZulu Natal, Dr Z L Mkhize; the Hon LPHM Mtshali, Premier of KwaZulu Natal; other Honourable Ministers present; the Acting Medical Superintendent of Nkonjeni Hospital, Dr I K Mohammed and members of the medical staff; the Nursing Service Manager of the Hospital, Mrs B J Buthelezi, and other members of the nursing staff; the Hospital Administrator and other members of staff; Mayors, Councillors and Indunas and members of our various communities under the various Traditional Authorities, ladies and gentlemen.

It is indeed a pleasure for me to participate in the celebration of the 76th anniversary of the Nkonjeni Hospital. I am honoured to attend and to express my congratulations personally on this occasion, sharing with this community a milestone event in the long history of Nkonjeni. This is indeed a community celebration, for the success of Nkonjeni has gone hand in hand with the well-being and health of our people for 76 years. It is an institution of commitment and excellence whose history is part of the history of Mahlabathini. It has stood through dramatic changes in our country's political and social landscape, focused always on delivering a service that meets an immediate need. I am proud to see Nkonjeni Hospital reach its 76th year, for I believe it gives irrefutable evidence of an undaunted goodwill in the heart of this community.

Nkonjeni Hospital stands next to my home. It is a familiar sight to me and over the years I have grown very fond of sharing a dialogue with its doctors and nursing staff. I am exceptionally proud of this institution for it has stood for 76 years, serving the community of Nkonjeni and the greater Mahlabathini district. I believe that the secret of its long standing lies in the foundational principles which established this hospital and continue to characterise its operation even today. These are the principles of dedicated service and a commitment to meeting human needs and allaying suffering. The focus has never shifted from being primarily a place of healing and, in this, Nkonjeni Hospital has proved itself a champion in its field.

On an occasion such as today's celebration, I cannot help looking back and in doing so I feel that I must pay a special tribute to the founding missionaries of the Norwegian Missionary Society of the Lutheran Church. When I arrived in this district from Nongoma where I grew up, I found Sister Ostveit and Sister Marta Breiland who were in charge of the hospital. The founder of the Hospital, Sister Marta Palm, had long since retired. I had the privilege of meeting this gallant lady when she visited the Hospital from Norway. During that visit, there were many things that had changed in the hospital, some of which distressed her. One such change which Sister Palm did not quite appreciate, was to see a small building which served as a kitchen for the hospital being knocked down to make way for a new one. She recalled that she had raised one hundred pounds from Norway to have it built. I pay tribute to these gallant ladies who left a sophisticated society in Norway because of their commitment to Christ, to come to what was still a backward country, to serve God's people and to spread the good news of the Gospel.

We were all very excited when the first doctor arrived, who was Dr Christofer Svanoe Hafstad and his beautiful wife Vesla Hafstad, and children Knut and Hilde. There were other sisters whom I remember, such as Sister Kristi Fykse, who was here for many years. Other doctors who followed Dr Hafstad included Dr Ottar Odegaard and his lovely wife Ase, and their children. They were later succeeded by Dr Odegaard, a lady doctor not related to the other. There are other names too numerous to mention here. We pay tribute to all these servants of God and thank them for their service to our people. We thank God for their services to God's people in our part of the world. Later, medical students from our own medical school in Durban came to work here during their holidays and to serve their internship. I remember Dr Denis Madide amongst those who worked here during his vacation, who was later our Minister of Health in the erstwhile KwaZulu Government. I remember Dr Motaung who served as one of our doctors and Dr Sokhulu, amongst others. I remember our first black matron, Dr Eunice Mtshali-Buthelezi. Later the Hospital opened its doors to the training of nurses.

It was the Church through missionaries which pioneered our education in this country as black South Africans. They established secondary education for black people when the State did not provide it for black South Africans. It was the Church through missionaries which provided even institutions for teacher training for black people. Once you had done your primary education up to Standard VII in rural areas and even in urban areas, if you were black you could only do your senior secondary education in a missionary boarding institution. For instance, in my case after passing Standard VII in a school in the Nongoma District where I grew up, I was taken to Adams College, a missionary institution which was established by Dr Newton Adams, a missionary of the United Congregational Church of the United States. In my case, and even in the case of the Premier here, and others, who went to Fort Hare University, we still owe even our university education to Scottish missionaries of the Presbyterian Church who established the University of Fort Hare. This became the only university in South Africa where if you were fortunate as we were, you could acquire some university education. Fort Hare University finally drew students from as far afield as Zimbabwe (then known as southern Rhodesia) Zambia (then known as Northern Rhodesia) from Malawi, from Uganda and even Kenya.

It is for this reason that I applaud the presence of Bishop Sibiya and Bishop Zulu and other clergy at this 76th anniversary of the founding of Nkonjeni Hospital. We would not have had this institution if it was not for the women who were inspired by their love of Christ, and the desire to spread the gospel, to come to our country to establish this hospital.

It is not surprising that it was missionaries of the Norwegian Missionary Society who founded this institution because the very first missionary who approached my maternal great-great-grandfather, King Mpande, for sites to establish the first mission station was Bishop Schreuder. Bishop Schreuder was a qualified medical doctor and he cultivated a friendship with King Mpande and helped him even with medicines for his rheumatic problems. When we celebrate this 76th anniversary, it is equally fitting that we pay this tribute to the men and women who crossed the seas to come to our country to establish institutions such as Nkonjeni Hospital.

The Hospital operated under very difficult circumstances where it depended on its own engine for lights, which sometimes gave trouble. But fortunately there was Reverend Haldorsen who often helped to correct whatever problem there was with the engine. There was also the problem of water. And I remember as a member of the Hospital Board what a great event it was when the dam just below the hospital was built. It was, however, only adequate for a very short time. I remember how Dr Hafstad and the matron often worried whenever it rained because no vehicle could drive up the Mayiwane Hill and that meant no bread and other supplies for the patients. This was long before the uphill road was tarred which occurred quite recently. On one occasion, my late cousin, King Cyprian Bhhekuzulu ka Solomon, had visited me at KwaPhindangene and because it was wet, he spent the night in his car at the Mayiwane Hill. So much for these hardships.

When I was the Chief Minister of the erstwhile KwaZulu Government, we had a bursary scheme under which we assisted students who wanted to do medicine. This we did on condition that when students graduated they would either serve as doctors in our hospitals, or alternatively reimburse the government of KwaZulu so that we could help more medical students to qualify. We were very disappointed because hardly any of the people whose education we financed ever returned to serve their people, particularly in rural areas. Most of them were attracted by the meretricious glitter of city life and more lucrative private practices. I do, however, pay tribute to the few doctors who did not shy away from returning to rural areas to serve the poorest of the poor in hospitals such as this one.

It is in this context that I must pay tribute to our Acting Superintendent, Dr Mohammed, and other doctors who have come to serve their African brothers and sisters in South Africa. I pay tribute to them today because were it not for the fact that they have come to South Africa to work in our rural areas, we would always be short of doctors, particularly in rural hospitals. They are welcome to come into South Africa and I wish to say this also wearing my hat as Minister of Home Affairs. We welcome people who bring skills into our country such as medical skills.

I further wish to pay tribute to our nurses who are still working in our hospitals as there is a big migration of nurses today who are flocking overseas, attracted by better pay and working conditions in countries such as the United Kingdom and Middle East countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Emirates. We are grateful to all the nurses who still hold the fort here at home. As members of the national Government, we supported our colleague, the Minister of Health, in the Cabinet when she brought before us a proposal for community service for our doctors. We saw her idea as a good one in ensuring that some of our medical graduates do give at least one year to community service.

The success of this hospital over 76 years is truly a victory for the men and women who have kept it running on a day-to-day basis. This is not a rich hospital, nor does it have the resources it requires to purchase or replace sufficient equipment, retain adequate medical supplies or employ enough professional staff to completely meet the

needs of its community. This is the case for many hospitals throughout South Africa, which is not to say that a valiant effort is not made or that needs are not met. I believe this hospital may take great pride in having done so much with so little. It is a testimony to the resourcefulness and dedication of its staff. Yet I am constantly left saddened by the knowledge that the means do not always match the will within our country's service institutions.

This is an evil we have fought for many years. During my time as Chief Minister of the erstwhile KwaZulu Government, I recall how precious little funding was received from Pretoria to build and operate schools, hospitals and clinics. I worked hand in hand with our poorest communities to raise money towards these projects, and together we built the necessary facilities that otherwise we would never have had. During that time I came to know the strength of community solidarity and the enormous capacity within our people of self-help, self-reliance and human dignity. Although we have now gained democracy and begun a campaign of development and all-inclusive equality and social justice, there remains the difficulty of insufficient resources to meet the vast ocean of existing needs. While the will is there, the means is still tragically limited.

Today, I continue my work for greater provincial autonomy over matters such as health care, for I have learned through experience that communities know best how to put resources to practical use and do not require to be dictated to by a distant and central government. I feel that the 76 years of success celebrated by Nkonjeni Hospital today speaks of this very truth. Without competent men and women at the reins of this institution, limited resources would never have been adequate to operate Nkonjeni Hospital. On this occasion, I take the opportunity to applaud both past and present members of staff whose contributions of time, effort and commitment have made this hospital a community success story.

In our changed world context following the terrorist attack of September 11 on the United States, the crisis of insufficient resources to combat malnutrition, childhood disease and the spread of HIV/AIDS is set to deepen. Even those institutions which do not receive direct funding from America will feel the worldwide tremor coming on the heels of this history changing event. The World Bank has released estimated figures which are frightening to contemplate. Before September 11, growth in developing countries, particularly in Africa, was estimated to fall from 5.5% to 2.9% due to an economic slowdown. Following September 11 and the devastating loss of life and damage to property, it is believed that growth in developing countries will now fall to 0.5%.

The direct result of this attack is the death of thousands more children on our own continent and an increase in poverty for millions of Africans. This was not just an attack against America, but an attack on the values of law and order, and civilisation. It heralds a darker time ahead for those who struggle under adverse circumstances to assist those in need. Yet it also ushers in a time in which goodwill and solidarity may rise to the surface, calling us back to our culture of *ubuntu*. Nkonjeni Hospital stands as a lighthouse, illuminating the value of goodwill, service and dedication to the community. It embodies the spirit of goodwill which I believe may be quickened in this community and across South Africa to stand in the gap in the wake of September 11.

Institutions such as this have played a pivotal role in the fight against disease and ignorance in rural communities. I have always said that a lack of knowledge and a lack of health go hand in hand, for many of our people suffer malnutrition and disease simply because they are unaware of the need for preventative care and lead unbalanced lifestyles. Many remain ignorant of the symptoms of disease or the

methods of ongoing treatment, and fail to seek medical attention or continue a course of treatment once started. The single greatest weapon we have against the spread of disease and malnutrition among our people, is information. I believe that medical institutions should become places of information as much as of medical care.

In this regard, I must mention the courageous work accomplished by Nkonjeni Hospital during the recent cholera outbreak which hit this area very hard. In this time of crisis, hundreds of people relied on the staff of this institution who worked constantly in extremely trying circumstances. I know that they must often have been exhausted, yet they continued attending to patients and distributing information on prevention, detection and treatment for as long as they were needed. This epidemic has not yet disappeared. But I must congratulate Nkonjeni Hospital for working at the forefront of the fight against cholera. Many lives have been saved by effective and timely treatment, and many more are spared through information campaigns.

Information is perhaps also our best means of fighting the spread of HIV/AIDS, the single most daunting threat we face in the new millennium. Left unchecked, the burden on hospitals is set to increase dramatically and the situation may become untenable if allowed to escalate. Even Nkonjeni Hospital will already have seen a rise in the number of patients admitted for AIDS related illnesses. If we do not take a firm stand against this disease, Nkonjeni Hospital will suffer the fate of many hospitals in rural and urban areas throughout South Africa. It would be a tragedy to see 76 years of service end in a few more years from an inability to cope with the overwhelming HIV/AIDS burden. In my own fight against this disease, I am fighting not only to see people remain healthy, but to see South Africa saved from a weakened position, and hospitals such as Nkonjeni protected from a burden it is ill-equipped to manage.

Nkonjeni Hospital has earned its rightful place as a respected institution of this community. I hope that today's celebrations, while remembering a past of great achievement, may recognise the tremendous role this hospital still has to play in the future of this district. It would bring me great pride to see Nkonjeni Hospital still standing next to my home twenty years from now. Yet I believe that this will require a concerted effort from within this community and from the future staff of the hospital. I would wish every member of this community to make a commitment towards good health and to pursue information towards preventative care. Let us not allow ignorance to place an undue burden on Nkonjeni, but let us ensure that it may remain a leader in the health care field.

It is my sincere wish that the standard of dedication to serving at Nkonjeni Hospital shall continue into its future, fulfilling a necessary and vital role in the life of this community. For 76 years, Nkonjeni Hospital has provided medical attention. For 76 years, it has been a place of physical healing and care. For 76 years, people in this community and from the surrounding district, have trusted the staff at Nkonjeni because they trust an institution which has become a household name. I am proud to be associated with this hospital and I wish it every success in the years to come. Today, it is my pleasure to congratulate Nkonjeni Hospital on 76 years of outstanding achievement. I look forward to many more.

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