

SA health bedevilled by inequities - report

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Johannesburg - South Africa has a "cocktail of four epidemics" - HIV and Aids, tuberculosis, violence, and poor maternal and child health - along with a rise in chronic diseases.

This is according to a special edition of The Lancet, the respected UK-based medical journal, which is being released in Joburg on Tuesday.

The Lancet report makes depressing reading.

Some of the statistics - for HIV, TB and interpersonal violence - are among the worst in the world.

"Racial and gender discrimination, income inequalities, migrant labour, the destruction of family life and persistent violence spanning many centuries but consolidated by apartheid in the 20th century" are to blame for the current health problems, according to Professor Hoosen Coovadia and others, who wrote the introductory chapter.

The poorest 10 percent of households (mostly black) have an average annual income of R4 314 (mostly from grants) while the richest 10 percent get more than 90 times this - R405 646 on average.

Health indicators are still racially skewed.

In 2002, the infant mortality rate among whites was seven per 1 000 babies born. For African babies, it was 67 per 1 000. There are also inequities between provinces. Western Cape children under five have a mortality rate of 46 per 1 000 in comparison to KwaZulu-Natal's 116 per 1 000.

Sexual entitlement of boys is ingrained, with almost 40 percent of girls reporting that they were sexually abused before the age of 18.

Teenage pregnancy is widespread, and half of all South African women have had at least one child by the age of 21.

The role of alcohol abuse is raised over and over throughout all the six chapters. It plays a major role in violence (including murder and rape), road accidents and unsafe sex.

"Arbitrary acts of unkindness, physical assault and neglect by nurses have been widely reported" during the post 1994-era, according to the authors.

There is also a shortage of skilled health staff. Thanks to the decision to close a number of nursing colleges to save money during former President Thabo Mbeki's administration, the rate of skilled professional nurses has dropped from 149 per 100 000 people in 1998 to 110 per 100 000 in 2007.

"As many as 40 percent of nurses are due to retire in five to 10 years and nursing remains the most crucial area for urgent policy intervention," note the authors

Poor leadership and stewardship (taking responsibility) also run like a ruinous cancer through the public health system. Post-1994, many inexperienced managers were placed in positions of seniority and they have struggled to deal with major challenges, particularly human resource management.

"Incompetence within the public sector is widespread" and the government has lacked the "political will... to manage underperformance in the public sector".

Loyalty rather than the ability to deliver has been rewarded. Leaders and managers have not been held accountable when mistakes have been made.

"Without concerted efforts to change national thinking on accountability, South Africa will become a country that is not just a product of its past but one that is continually unable to either address the health problems of the present or to prepare for the future," assert Coovadia and others.

Mbeki's "bizarre and seemingly unshakable belief that HIV did not cause Aids" resulted in hundreds of thousands of lives lost and a substantial burden of ill health.

While "the public health system has been transformed into an integrated, comprehensive national service", the "failures in leadership and stewardship and weak management have led to inadequate implementation of what are often good policies", conclude the authors.

Lancet UK editors Dr Richard Horton and Dr Sabine Kleinert conclude: "The South African people have shown extraordinary resilience during difficult times.

"The current leaders have survived apartheid, and often imprisonment, to fight for the future of their country. Civil society, with its strong voice, has brought about many important changes in health.

"South Africa is a young democracy with pride and hope, and above all with high expectations for a fair, equitable, and peaceful society. Its people deserve a healthy future." - Health-e News

Professor Hoosen Coovadia, Rachel Jewkes, Peter Barron, David Saunders and **Di McIntyre** wrote Chapter 1, tracing the roots of current health challenges.

<http://www.thelancet.com/series/health-in-south-africa>

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