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DOCTOR SHORTAGE AND TRAINING LEVELS BIGGEST CONCERNS TO SA MEDICAL FIELD - SURVEY

3 June 2014: The shortage of medical professionals and inadequate training are seen as the two biggest concerns facing the future of the profession in South Africa.

This is according to more than 630 doctors who were interviewed in a recent PPS survey, which revealed that only 45% of the respondents were confident in the future of the health care system in South Africa over the next five years.

The survey found that the biggest challenges facing the profession included inadequate training (37%), staffing levels (33%), ageing infrastructure (20%) and a lack of medical supplies (9%).

Gerhard Joubert, Head of Group Marketing and Stakeholder Relations at PPS, says that he isn't surprised by the findings of the survey. "The shortage of qualified medical professionals and the inadequate training levels have been an ongoing issue within the health care system in South Africa. When comparing this year's results to the same period last year, we haven't really seen a change, with these still being the two biggest areas of concern for local doctors."

According to Dr Mark Sonderup, Vice-Chairman of the SA Medical Association, the doubts expressed in the training of medical professionals are likely related to the growing pressure to train more doctors at the country's existing medical schools. "The major challenge we are currently facing is the finite available capacity we have to train new doctors. Hence, with increased numbers and strained capacity, a concern is being expressed that the quality of those being trained could be affected."

Dr Sonderup further elaborated saying that the Cuban-South African medical training programme, which Government is currently investing in, is not the long-term solution to our shortage of doctors in the country. "The shortage of doctors is a significant challenge affecting the future of the profession and healthcare delivery and raises some concern about the survey results."

To turn this around, training capacity needs to be accelerated. "The proposed new medical school in Limpopo is at an advanced stage of planning and should now be accelerated. Other plans that should be rapidly developed is a school in the Northern Cape and a Port Elizabeth based satellite undergraduate medical campus of the Walter Sisulu University. More resources need to be made available and more money needs to be invested in research. Furthermore, priority needs to be placed on specialist training as well as looking at partnerships with the private sector to assist with training."

The survey supports a recent call from the Junior Doctors Association of South Africa (Judasa), which said that the shortage of doctors across South Africa had placed unnecessary pressure on junior medical professionals, who were often forced to work up to 36 hours at a time. Medical students are currently petitioning Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi to review their working hours. They are arguing that the exhaustion from working long shifts is putting both doctors' and their patients' health at serious risk.

On a more positive note, the survey results showed that 62% agreed with the principles that underpin the proposed National Health Insurance (NHI) system. However, 54% of the respondents were not prepared to enter into an arrangement with the Department of Health to work part-time (for payment) at a rural public health facility, which were part of the NHI pilot sites.

The survey also revealed that 66% believed that community service for a year for qualifying doctors should be compulsory, with 34% saying that this period should in fact be longer.

Joubert pointed out that while community service may not be the answer to the issues doctors are currently facing, a longer period spent training in the field will help prepare junior doctors to ensure that they have adequate training levels.