



JOINT STATEMENT ON THE PROTECTION OF HEALTHCARE

Pretoria, 19 August 2021

During the recent unrest in parts of South Africa, dozens of medical facilities were destroyed, pharmacies looted, and countless vaccines and other critical medicines were stolen. As a consequence of the violence, essential medical services, including services at several COVID-19 vaccine sites were interrupted. This has put additional strain on healthcare in a country already hard-hit by the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Health facilities must be respected as impartial safe spaces by all those involved in protests, as well as by the police and military. We have called for unhindered access to healthcare and to essential medicines. Failing to respect and protect health services and healthcare workers will have disastrous consequences, especially for the most vulnerable during the ongoing health crisis,” says Philip Aruna, head of MSF’s Southern Africa Support Team.

Emergency medical services (EMS) personnel work at the front line of pre-hospital emergency care in the communities they serve. They provide the first and most immediate tier of patient care, but they also provide access to hospital-based emergency and definitive care. For EMS personnel to function effectively, they must do so trusting that the communities will provide safe and unrestricted access to those in need of life-saving care.

According to the Emergency Care Society of South Africa (ECSSA), the recent civil unrest has seen instances of violence directed against EMS personnel, blocking of roads and thus access to patients in need of emergency care and destruction of EMS vehicles and equipment. In some areas, the unrest also forced some services to suspend their activities for a period of time due to a concern for the safety of EMS personnel. These acts have undoubtedly had a negative impact on patients, particularly in the midst of an increase in COVID-19 cases and the surge in injuries that has accompanied the unrest.

Both the attacks and their consequences are of serious concern as they obstruct essential healthcare services and prevent healthcare personnel from carrying out their medical work. We strongly condemn attacks against healthcare services, facilities and personnel, as they have a knock-on effect on the provision of healthcare. Healthcare workers, vehicles and facilities must also be respected: they must never be hindered or prevented from carrying out their work.

Members of the public are urged to refrain from:

- Attacking/ burning hospitals, clinics and medical facilities,
- Blocking the safe passage of ambulances and other healthcare transports,
- Hijacking of transports bearing hospital materials and goods, including food for patients
- Interfering with the movement of healthcare personnel,
- Looting and destroying healthcare equipment

All individuals have the right to safely access healthcare services. DENOSA, ECSSA, Doctors Without Borders Southern Africa, the South African Medical Association (SAMA) and the Red Cross Movement, wish to remind everyone that access to medicines and medical treatment, facilities and services must be available to all without restriction.

Signatory Organisations: *Democratic Nurses Organisation of South Africa (DENOSA), Emergency Care Society of South Africa (ECSSA), Doctors Without Borders Southern Africa, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), South African Red Cross Society (SARCS), The South African Medical Association (SAMA).*

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