



UCT position on Health Budget cuts

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Over the past two weeks the matter of budget cuts to Groote Schuur and Tygerberg Hospitals has been debated in the media. Until the Provincial Budget Vote earlier this week, this issue was portrayed as speculative as no confirmation was forthcoming from the Provincial Department of Health. Last night at a meeting between MEC Mr Uys and the Vice-Chancellors, Deputy Vice Chancellors and Deans of the four universities in the Province, it was confirmed that the decision has been taken that 90 tertiary levels beds will be cut in order to shift resources to the district level of the health care service platform.

This confirms Professor Mayosi's and Professor Kahn's statements to this effect, and shows that their actions were well founded and were motivated by professional responsibility and a high sense of integrity in the public interest. The shock would have been harder had we not known what was coming.

It is most disappointing that the decision was taken without due regard for transparency and recognition of the integration of the teaching and service platforms. Our concern as the University of Cape Town is that there was no prior consultation before such a decision was made. We understand that resources are limited and that difficult choices must be made, but these are decisions that undoubtedly impact on our capacity as a University to continue to train health care professionals not only for the Western Cape, for the country and indeed, the continent.

The teaching hospitals provide a crucial public health service, without which there would be no effective comprehensive public health delivery. Viable teaching hospitals and tertiary services are fundamental to effective primary health care delivery. A shift of resources from one level to another has an impact not only on that level itself, but on the system as a whole.

Upholding the principle of transparency of planning and budgeting is not to take away from the responsibility of government but to enrich that very responsibility. A fundamental mindshift is required in this regard. Universities must be trusted for the value that they may contribute to government decisions.

We agreed with MEC Mr Uys last night, that there are lessons to be learned from this most recent budgeting process. We will need to agree how we want to carry out the planning processes in the next cycle in a way which recognises the inter-relationship of the universities and the Provincial Health Department without comprising the decision-making responsibility of each of the parties.

For now, since the decision is a given, we have agreed to manage the impact jointly. Although the Department of Health is of the opinion that the teaching platform will not be seriously affected by the cuts, an opinion that should have been tested in a consultative process, we will conduct an initial assessment of the impact of the present budget decisions, and then meet with the MEC again.

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