



PsySSA Response:
Deaths of former Esidimeni Care Centre patients

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The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA) has learned through media reports of the deaths of 36 mentally ill patients who were formerly inpatients at the Life Healthcare Esidimeni Centre. While the exact causes of the deaths are not known at this stage, and it would be unwise to speculate, we have to note our great sadness and concern. Mentally ill persons constitute a very vulnerable group in society and they need care and protection. These are individuals who, due to their illness, are often unable to speak out for themselves. Also many are from very socioeconomically disadvantaged families who are unable to care for them. For this reason PsySSA was one of the organisations that responded earlier in the year and late last year when plans were afoot to close the Esidimeni Centre. Our concerns at the time were that these were patients with chronic mental illness and, as such are in need of highly structured environments and closely monitored professional care.

The closure of the facility and the mass discharge of patients, which falls into the principle of deinstitutionalisation of the mentally ill, were contextually problematic. We pointed out in our submission to the Gauteng MEC that community mental health and the deinstitutionalisation policy is an excellent policy if the country has all of the required community-based resources to support it. Such an approach to mental health care is ideal but very expensive, and most countries cannot afford such a system. Most families are unable to care for these patients due to factors such as finances, as well as the inability to cope with patients who may be difficult to manage within the family. Some patients tend to wander away from home and become vulnerable to abuse by others in the community. A recent television documentary showed footage of a family struggling to manage such a patient.

Countries that have embarked on mass discharge of mentally ill patients decades ago have regretted those decisions because the fallout has been significant. In the United States, for example, homelessness

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among the mentally ill is a serious problem with mentally ill patients living on the streets and subway stations, and there are several other examples elsewhere. PsySSA is now saddened to note such a large number of deaths following discharge from a mental health facility in our own country.

We call on the government to stop mass discharges of mentally ill patients and, where such is contemplated, to engage with mental health professional groups such as the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG), PsySSA, the Society of Psychiatrists of South Africa (SASOP), and others in order to allow for more informed decision making.

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