

Gauteng head of health is leaving, after all

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Following a Health-e report last week and after initially denying it, Dr Nomonde Xundu, the head of health in Gauteng, has now confirmed that she is leaving the distressed unit after serving only 11 months of her three-year contract.

Dr Nomonde Xundu decided to cut short her tenure as head of health in Gauteng and will be leaving at the end of this month. This was announced yesterday at a small media briefing to give feed-back on the turn-around strategy devised to breathe life into the ailing health system of Gauteng, by Health MEC, Hope Papo.

“We respected her right to do that because, ultimately, you can’t force people to work. Part of the work she’ll be doing before she leaves... just sorting out the remaining posts, a proper hand-over report, we’ll appoint an Acting Head of Department immediately. We don’t want a situation where we don’t have an HoD by the end of the year. It will be a quick process to appoint an HoD. In that process we are working with the office of the Premier, the current HoD (and) the national Department of Health”, Papo said at the briefing.

Dr Xundu will be returning to her previous position as South Africa’s health attaché in America. She was seconded by the national Health Minister, Dr Aaron Motsoaledi, to head up Gauteng Health for three years. But just 11 months into the position, she is leaving. Dr Xundu says the decision was based on personal reasons.

“When you have options, you consider your options. There’s a longer contract for four years in exciting work in the US and the UN. There’s exciting work that is coming through in the multi-lateral system now beyond the MDG 2015 – universal coverage, we’re talking NHI now. If internationally, people are talking about universal coverage, I want to be part of those negotiations and discussions. So, it was a matter of a personal choice. What further growth would I have had personally if I stayed longer than two years compared to where I’m going to now? Those are some of the things that I had to consider in making the decision”, she says.

She refutes reports from various sources within the provincial Health Department that she was ineffective in her position as head of health. Sources say she was the wrong candidate for the position as she had no experience managing health systems as her background is limited to the HIV

field.

“I’ve come through the ranks. I have worked as an intern in this province. I have worked as a medical officer in this province. I have worked as a medical registrar in this province. I’ve been in the ward. I know what it is to run a medical ward. I’ve worked in the Johannesburg circuit of hospitals. I’ve worked at Johannesburg Hospital, worked at Hillbrow Hospital, worked at Helen Joseph Hospital, not so much at Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital, I have worked at Rahima Moosa Hospital. I know the environment. I didn’t just become a manager. And I’ve worked at the clinics, too. I’ve done medico-legal services. What else can I say I haven’t done?”, says Dr Xundu, in response to the attacks.

Dr Xundu says she came into the job of head of health of Gauteng at a time when the system was facing a major financial management crisis. With her departure ironically leaving another management vacuum, she says she is comfortable to leave at a time when Gauteng has made several senior critical appointments to the health department, including hiring a new Chief Financial Officer.

“Largely, it was within the finance branch and the financial management unit where we had huge problems. So, when we got the CFO (Chief Financial Officer), when we got the health economist... We got also a head for infrastructure management. I felt comfortable. But I had a lengthy discussion with the MEC as well. The MEC understands the detail of the broader challenges and I’m convinced that with the help of the HoD that will be coming, things should be moving”, she says.

Provincial Health MEC, Hope Papo, would not be drawn on who will be appointed to be the acting head of health nor on whether the position will be advertised to appoint a permanent candidate.

“We’ll decide soon whether we’re going to advertise or not advertise. That’s the issue we’ll have to weigh. We have to follow processes. If we’ll advertise, obviously, we’ll try and speed up the process because you don’t just get health HoDs all over the show, generally. So, you are not going to have floods of applications for the position, nogal (in) Gauteng. It’s a very, very difficult province to actually lead. We’ll take that decision by the end of the month. It’s part of the issue of even deciding who is going to be the Acting HoD”, he says.

According to the DA’s spokesperson on health, Jack Bloom, advertising for the position is crucial.

“This time they must get it right. We have to have proper advertising. It must not be a political appointment. We have to have someone who can do the job right... appointed on the basis of merit and I just hope that the department plays open cards with everyone, informs the health committee of the Gauteng Legislature. We’re an oversight committee. I think we should know about these things, as should the public”, says Bloom.

Dr Nomonde Xundu is the third Gauteng head of health to leave the position in as many years. Sybil Ngcobo left in 2010 and is now under investigation for corruption. Dr Kamy Chetty left last year under reasons that are still not clear.

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