

Funding stymies placement of medical interns

Limited funding for medical intern posts has left nearly 100 medical graduates without jobs and the situation could worsen when about 1,000 graduates return from studying in Cuba.

The public health system suffers from a shortage of medical staff and a study by research group Econex shows that SA has fewer doctors per 100,000 people compared with other middle-income countries.



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South African Medical Association vice-chairman Dr Mark Sonderup said there were graduates who had applied to be placed in 2016 who had still not been placed by April. He said while the posts were available, there were no funds made available to fund the posts.

The identification and funding of posts is done by provincial health departments. Interns earn R380,000-R411,000 annually.

A medical graduate from Stellenbosch, who declined to be named, said he had received a contract to start his internship at the Universitas Academic Hospital in Bloemfontein in April. But he found the province had not funded the post days before he was due to start.

"There are about 70 of us who have not been placed and officials get annoyed when we call to inquire about placement."

Sonderup said he had been working with graduates who needed assistance in placements since 2016 and was disappointed by health minister Aaron Motsoaledi's response in January that posts were available and funded, but interns had simply opted not to take posts in rural areas.

"In our opinion, the minister spread fake news," said Sonderup. "There is a financial problem here and this was only the start."

The interns from Cuba may not be placed in 2018 if the local interns are still waiting in line.

However, department of health spokesman Joe Maila said the Cuban-trained doctors would require placement only from 2020 onwards as they would first complete their 18- month integration programme.

Policy dictates that South Africans who studied at local institutions be placed first before foreign nationals and those who had studied at international institutions.

While it remained the prerogative of the director-general and the minister to instruct the heads of departments to release funds for posts, the department's director-general, Precious Matsoso, told the parliamentary standing committee on appropriations in April that the healthcare system had a shortfall of 11.5% in available posts.

She said the department had 45,733 vacant posts and 351,925 filled posts.

Maila said 14 South Africans of the 1,499 who applied did not take up placements offered to them, adding that in the current 2017-18 cycle, 211 medical interns and 78 community service doctors had registered to apply for placement.

Source: *Business Day*

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