

**SPEECH BY MINISTER OF HEALTH, DR JOE PHAAHLA, MP, AT THE SOD-TURNING
CEREMONY FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE LIMPOPO CENTRAL HOSPITAL**

POLOKWANE, 18 JULY 2023

Programme Directors, Deputy Minister Dr S Dhlomo and Dr P Ramathuba

Acting Premier of Limpopo Province, Hon Seaparo Sekwati,

Cabinet Members present,

Deputy Ministers present,

Members of Provincial Executive Council,

Members of Parliament present,

Members of Legislature present,

Vice-Chancellor of the University of Limpopo, Prof Mahlo Mokgalong,

Members of Council and Senate of the University present,

Traditional Leaders present,

Religious Leaders,

Executives in the Public Service,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning

Its good to be here in Polokwane today on a joyous occasion. 11 days ago, we were here on a sad occasion of bidding farewell to the first lady of the Province, who passed away suddenly just a few days before the day we had earmarked for this ceremony. Hon Acting Premier, please again on behalf of everyone here convey our words of sympathy and comfort to the Hon Premier Mathabatha and his family.

Honoured Guests

We felt it was important to have this kind of occasion to celebrate the milestone we have reached after many years of planning and negotiations. This day of laying the foundation for the construction of the Limpopo Central/Academic Hospital is a culmination of the work of many years by many people, some of whom are here while others are not. It is perhaps befitting that we are doing this on the day of celebrating the birthday of the founding father of our nation, President Nelson Mandela.

If it is not due to the freedom we attained under his leadership, we would not be here today but over and above that he was a man very passionate about the health and welfare of all South Africans more especially the poor and marginalized. It was because of this that just one year into his Presidency he declared free health services for pregnant women and children under 6 years. He did not say, we must wait until our government is strong with a strong financial base as some are arguing as their reason to oppose the National Health Insurance (NHI), he said we do it. Part of his focus while in office and even after leaving office was to raise money from private companies to build schools and clinics in poor rural communities and this province was a major beneficiary to that effort.

The beginning of the construction of the Limpopo Central Hospital is on the one hand a culmination of 29 years of the endeavours of the democratic government to increase access and improve quality of health services and on the other hand it is the foundation or springboard for even more better quality, especially because a lot has been achieved in the first five years to increase access. Only an absolute denialist will argue against the fact that despite many challenges a lot has been achieved in South Africa and in Limpopo province in bringing health services closer to the people.

The effort to bring tertiary health services and training of doctors closer to Limpopo Province can be traced to early 1996 when we initiated discussions with the leadership of the Medical University of South Africa (MEDUNSA) then, which culminated in them establishing a satellite campus here in Polokwane. Together, with my then HOD Prof Nicholas Crisp who is here today leading the NDOH team, had several meetings with Prof E.T. Mokgokong team to have a satellite campus which would enable clinical years medical students and postgraduate registrars to do some of their training time here in Polokwane at Pietersburg Provincial and Mankweng Hospitals. As a result of that agreement MEDUNSA acquired a residential block here in Polokwane for then students and staff.

We were convinced that this result in multiple benefits in that the teaching specialists and registrars would also provide clinical services to our patients and reduce referrals to the then Garankuwa Hospital, but also that the qualifying graduates including the postgraduates will be attracted to the province, some may even find partners and come back after qualifying. At the signing ceremony at Mankweng Hospital, Premier Ramatlhodi asked if we were working on establishment of a Medical School, and I said we should take it step by step. Of course, it is now history that after Limpopo University was merged with MEDUNSA and then later delinked, a medical faculty was established and today we are launching the teaching hospital.

The initial planning for this hospital was started in the 2008/09 financial year when a strategic analysis identified the need for a 630-bed central hospital. A business case and health brief were then developed and approved by Limpopo Health Department in 2010. It was then declared by Minister Motsoaledi as one of the flagship Central Hospitals in the country, the others such as King Edward and George Mukhari needing new replacements for existing facilities. After feasibility study, the project scope was reduced to 580 beds. A new feasibility study in 2016 again proposed a bigger 688 beds hospital and this was submitted to National Treasury. The final Master Plan which was approved by National Treasury in 2022 was for the 488 beds Limpopo Central Hospital, which we are launching today, a long walk indeed.

Equipped with advanced medical technology, Limpopo Central Hospital will offer cutting-edge diagnostic procedures and innovative treatments. It will be at the forefront of medical advancements, providing the community with access to the latest healthcare options. The hospital is designed to offer specialists services that are relevant and appropriate to an advancing scientific health care field. Patients will receive expert care, treatment, and management of complex conditions without the need to extensive travel to Gauteng Province.

Healthcare professionals at the hospital will work collaboratively in a multi-disciplinary manner, ensuring comprehensive care and improved outcomes. It is expected that this hospital will in association with the health science faculty of the University of Limpopo make a significant contribution to health education and research.

The establishment of a specialist hospital in this province will bolster the health sciences education and training, creating more opportunities for future generations to pursue careers in health sciences. The University's health sciences faculty which houses the Medical School, must start concrete plans to attract specialists and super-specialists to train doctors and other health professionals. Ultimately the availability of increased numbers of highly trained health professionals will reduce Limpopo's dependence on Gauteng for specialized medical care.

As a teaching institution, Limpopo Central Hospital, will provide valuable educational opportunities for health sciences students ranging from medical students, nursing, physiotherapy, pharmacy and many more. Beyond the specialized services, the hospital will also offer emergency health services, critical care, surgery, rehabilitation, and ancillary services. We envisage integrated approach which with the support of other health facilities will offer a comprehensive and holistic healthcare. This will not be an Ivory Tower, but part of a network based on foundation of primary healthcare.

Ladies and Gentlemen

The success of the execution of this project is going to depend on cooperation and saam-werking by all the role-players. From the National Health Department, we have secured funding commitment from Ministry of Finance and National Treasury, we have appointed a competent Project Management Team under the DBSA working with the technical professionals of SAKHIWO, and finally the construction company ENZA Construction. This team is under very strict instructions which was given by President Ramaphosa, he said to me that this must not be another Eskom-like Medupi or Kusile. It must be delivered with quality product, on time and on budget. As a result, their mandate is to complete and hand-over the keys by latest December 2026 i.e. within 42 months from 30 May 2023, when the site was handed over to the contractor.

I want to thank the Limpopo government led by the Premier's Office and Health Department for their cooperation and assistance, led by both Premier and MEC of Health, the Polokwane Municipality also for their assistance especially in finalizing issues around the land transfer. I must also thank my predecessor Min Motsoaledi for laying the foundation.

We are going to need full cooperation by all stakeholders, not everyone who need a job will get it, not everyone who aspires to provide services will get a contract. At various stages of construction, we expect just around 2000 people to be involved in one way or another. When the hospital gets fully operational another plus/minus 2000 people will be employed but above all thousands of lives will be saved every year.

I am confident that if we embrace the spirit of President Mandela, of doing everything for the most vulnerable we can disappoint the naysayers. As we know on the 13th June, the National Assembly passed the NHI Bill as a framework for Universal Health Coverage and it is now in the NCOP. This Limpopo Central

Hospital is going to be one of the pillars to deliver the NHI. In Madiba's memory, let us deliver the Limpopo Central Hospital.

I thank you