

Health care in terminal free-fall

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Bloody bodies on the hospital floor, screaming patients in the surgery theatre and pregnant teens giving birth in the overcrowded maternity ward are some of the scenes captured in the documentary *Saving Soweto* on Al Jazeera (DStv, Channel 406).

This enlightening eight-part documentary looks at the goings on at the world's largest hospital, the Chris Hani Baragwanath, in Soweto. With 3 200 beds, 6 760 staff and about 2 000 patients checking in daily, the hospital suffers from an imbalance between incoming patient figures and the limited resources available to treat them.

The grim pictures it shows of innumerable patients queuing for days to get medical attention are disturbing and saddening. Some patients have paper stickers on the foreheads that read URGENT, so that they get attended to first.

One could be forgiven for thinking this was yet another Quentin Tarantino blockbuster or a scene out of the horror movie, *The Walking Dead*.

Filmed by SA and US directors Shareen Anderson and Lisa Henry, the documentary seeks to bring to light the acute state of emergency in the public health sector. While they denied being sensational about another bad South African story, they said there was a need to tell this story in particular.

"I have friends who work at Bara and they always talk about the situation at their workplace," said Anderson. "It was only later that I realised it would be a story worth telling. I talked to Lisa about it and we agreed to shoot the documentary."

When one watches the story of Bara, where seriously ill patients are sometimes sent away, because the hospital is forever full, one appreciates the importance of good health. When one sees the lack of staff combined with many inexperienced interns, the impact of the brain drain becomes clear. And when one sees the life of one badly injured taxi driver slip out of his body, then the reality is brought vividly to bear.

But *Saving Soweto* is not about the gore. It may require viewer discretion, but then every eye has to see the flip side of life. The side they don't show you on ER.

This series seeks to advocate the construction of more hospitals, the attraction of more medical practitioners to the local health system and the supply of free or affordable medicine to all.

It is a cry to the government and all interested parties to give serious attention to the health system. Though the documentary focuses on the happenings at Bara, that hospital is only a microcosm of a national crisis in the greater health delivery system.

But there are happy stories, too. These are few, but they give a ray of hope and hint at what the picture could be should things improve. The most satisfying feeling a doctor can ever have is when a patient recovers and manages to smile and there are times when these moments are captured.

International news agency Al Jazeera will, for the next eight weeks, broadcast the episodes weekly. "We are very pleased to share this insightful series with the world," said Al Jazeera's Johannesburg Bureau Manager, Thembisa Fakude.

- *Saving Soweto*, Al Jazeera, Saturdays at 12.30am. Repeats: Saturday: 9.30am, 9pm; Sunday: 3.30am, 2.30pm; Monday: 8.30am, 4.30pm; Tuesday: 12.30am, 11.30am and Thursday at 5.30am.