

Claims about health workers' welfare are far from the reality - Mediclinic is a vital, caring and responsible health resource, says the hospital group in response to allegations about private health-care workers in an opinion article by Oxfam representatives

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It was with disappointment that we read the article that appeared in the Sunday Times opinion section on November 8 under the heading "Time to put the welfare of health workers before profits", written by representatives of Oxfam SA.

Mediclinic's disappointment stems from the fact that the opinion article in the Sunday Times, which we hold in high regard as a source of reference and credible news content, makes unsubstantiated anecdotal claims about the three largest private hospital companies and the private healthcare sector in general, based on an unrepresentative survey. Though we cannot speak on behalf of other companies in our industry, we felt it urgent and necessary to correct the skewed view as portrayed in the article.

The article does not deal fairly with the prevailing issues in the South African healthcare industry in its entirety against the prevailing global health crisis, but rather seems to focus very narrowly on the three leaders in the South African private hospital sector and their perceived profitability as the seeming source of significant challenges faced by the healthcare sector. This is an incorrect portrayal of the facts and a misrepresentation of the prevailing dynamics in the healthcare industry, providing a very slanted perspective on selective issues facing the entire sector. Mediclinic's hospitals have a proud reputation as leading healthcare facilities, are known for excellent service and are highly respected by our profession in SA and abroad.

Mediclinic prides itself on the high standards of care that are provided and will be maintained at Mediclinic hospitals and this is also true in this time of the Covid19 pandemic. The pandemic is posing a serious challenge to SA and its citizens. Mediclinic is committed to playing our part in supporting the national department of health and our citizens where required.

We have stressed all along that we are all in this together, all playing our part to prevent further transmission, and aid in the best care of those infected and in need of care. As such, Mediclinic has taken up our responsibility to be part of the solution in these challenging times. It is important to note that our employees continue to enjoy job security without any retrenchments of permanent staff to date, despite the significant economic pressure from the Covid19 pandemic.

We offer very competitive remuneration packages with competitive nursing salary scales, significant benefit packages and free access to training inhouse to improve skills and even specialise to further their careers. In response to the Covid19 health threat, Mediclinic introduced stringent measures across all operations to reduce the risk of transmission of the Covid19 virus at all of our hospitals from the initial identification of the risk.

In March already, Mediclinic implemented human resources policies and procedures to address healthcare worker exposure, testing and infection, including the appropriate use of personal protective equipment (PPE) in accordance with the infection prevention and control (IPC) guidelines of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, the World Health Organisation and the health department.

A very stringent access control policy has been and is still in place and all emergency admissions are strictly admitted to a dedicated admission ward where stringent IPC principles are applied. All staff members have been provided with appropriate PPE in order to mitigate the risk of nosocomial, or hospital acquired, infections. In addition to the PPE, all areas considered a risk are also deep cleaned and disinfected regularly and in accordance with global best practice.

PPE quality is ensured through procurement processes, and PPE is freely available at all Mediclinic facilities to all healthcare workers. A very stringent PPE policy is in place that governs the wearing and changing of face masks that are wet, damaged and/or compromised in any way, in the interests of both staff and patient safety. Random testing and daily screening support the safety precautions in place for both staff and our patients.

In addition, staff wellness always enjoys high priority in our business. Extensive resources are made available to our staff on a continuous basis through an all-inclusive employee health support system. Specific staff safety awareness campaigns were and are still regularly undertaken to assist and support staff. We also poll the prevailing sentiment and any staff concerns through regular surveys among staff, including the benchmark Covid Gallup survey.

The claims made in the article are thus very far from the Mediclinic staff reality.

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Beyond the safety of our own staff and patients, Mediclinic has also donated quality assured PPE to the value of R15m to the public sector to support the provincial health sector and the safety of their staff. It is most unfortunate that the one-sided portrayal of the article discounts the significant economic contribution of the private sector and its resultant contribution to the fiscus of the country, sustained job creation in health care, contribution to the public hospital care load through public private initiatives and significant contribution towards safeguarding the nation in this time of crisis.

We feel it important to respond to the claims made regarding the shareholder philosophy and distribution of profits to an elite, small group of wealthy investors. As a publicly listed company, normal market dynamics prevail and determine the investor pay-outs according to performance. The profit and pay-out numbers stated in the article are not an accurate reflection of the state of the industry. The claims of undue profits are unsubstantiated. The 2019 healthcare market inquiry conducted by the Competition Commission found that profits made were not undue or inflated and that the competitive dynamics in the sector were not untoward.

Lastly, we need to point out that the allegations made in the article, and on the website where the petition is hosted, are based on a very unrepresentative WhatsApp research study conducted among a mere 166 healthcare worker respondents from three unions in an industry that, by the article's own count, comprises more than 27,300 healthcare workers.

Furthermore, the authors state that the results only included the views of 10% of respondents from the private sector — thus only 16.6% of the individual respondents were able to give a first-hand account of working in the private sector. We feel this is a very unreliable basis for publishing the content portrayed as fact in the article, even under the authors' by-line as their opinion.

Pretorius is CEO of Mediclinic Southern Africa

Caption:

As well as ensuring strict adherence to infection prevention guidelines among its own staff, Mediclinic has donated personal protective equipment worth R15m to **the** public sector for use by provincial hospitals for **the** safety of their staff.