



# South African Society of Psychiatrists

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## Rural Health Advocacy Project

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## SASOP-RHAP STATEMENT ON MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCACY TRAINING 2018

The Life Esidimeni tragedy continued to dominate the news throughout 2017. The testimonies of several witnesses in the arbitration hearings, chaired by retired deputy chief-justice Dikgang Moseneke, established how the Gauteng Department of Health continued to dismiss all warnings, despite being engaged by SASOP (South African Society of Psychiatrists), Section 27, SADAG (South African Depression and Anxiety Group) and the SAFMH (South African Federation of Mental Health) in legal action to appoint a curator and subsequently, to obtain an interdict to prevent the move. The arbitration process probed the circumstances and the motivation of decision-makers about the untimely discharge of more than 1700 long-term psychiatric patients to ill-equipped NGO's. This undoubtedly demonstrated the need for health and mental health care practitioners to raise issues and to take up the responsibility to protect the interests and uphold the human rights of mental health care users.

SASOP, a professional association of about 600 public and private psychiatrists, is a member driven non-profit company, with the core business to promote, maintain and protect the interests of its members, the discipline of Psychiatry, as well as to serve the community. In order to achieve the latter, the SASOP included the following objectives in its activities: to promote and uphold the principles of human rights, dignity and ethics in the practice of Psychiatry; to oppose unfair discrimination in the field of Psychiatry; and to promote the de-stigmatisation of Psychiatry and increase the awareness of mental illness. During 2015 the SASOP has also adopted a programme to review its social contract with society, i.e. with the users of their services, as well as with the public at large. The aim of this programme has been to improve the professionalism with which psychiatrists render services to patients, and also led to the agreement with other stakeholders, such as national and regional advocacy groups, to work towards a national alliance for mental health in South Africa.

The Rural Health Action Project (RHAP), a leading health advocacy organization and in particular through the Rural Mental Health Campaign has been such a confirmed partner in this initiative. The RHAP's

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mission is to promote, protect and realise the right to rural health care by connecting practice, policy and practice. The RHAP through its' Voice project has been instrumental to spearhead the training of health science students and practitioners in advocacy for health, and in how to be effective advocates for patients. The Voice Project was established to serve as a catalyst for long-term systemic change in the selection, education and distribution of HCWs in South Africa. It aims to build a new generation of ethical leadership in health care by inspiring activism and leadership in health science students and HCWs. Through the integration of advocacy into the teaching at universities, HCW workshops, student clubs and grassroots HCW associations, the project will create awareness of the obligation of HCWs to put patients above employers when health rights are violated and provide them with the tools and strategies to use their voices strategically and effectively to advocate for a better health care system.

In view of this, the SASOP - through its regional Subgroups, has partnered with the RHAP to arrange several CPD meetings during 2018, offering training workshops in different regions in the country, to ensure that psychiatrists and other mental health care practitioners are well equipped to act effectively as health and mental health advocates.

**Johannesburg  
January 2018**

**Bernard Janse van Rensburg**



**Prof Bernard Janse van Rensburg**  
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A partnership between Wits Centre for Rural Health, RuDASA and SECTION27