

Eulogy honouring Dr. Tom Sutcliffe by Dr Fareed Abdullah

St Andrews Church Newlands 18 April 2024

[Watch the full memorial service on YouTube.](#)

Thank you for the opportunity to say a few words on behalf of the medical fraternity and Tom's colleagues in the Department of Health.

I worked as one of his deputies from 1994 until he left in 2002.

The first thing that I would like to say is that we are all very fortunate that Tom was the HOD of the Western Cape Health Department when change came in 1994.

As a result of these rather momentous changes, people from inside government, such as Tom who had only been the HOD for about a year by then, had to work with radicals like me, and I see other radicals have come too to pay their respects, to build a new Department.

We had to reform the health services to make sure that it reached many communities that previously had very little access to health services. The poor communities living in the townships of the Cape Flats and rural parts of the province.

At the same time as the changes in the Department were taking place, we had to reduce our expenditure by 27% over five years, as the Western Cape had up to that point received more money per capita than the other provinces and there had to be a more equitable distribution between the provinces. Our task was to provide more health care to more people with significantly less money.

As I said when I started, we were very fortunate to have Tom as the head of department as only he had the wisdom, experience, and the gravitas to bring us all together to work as a team.

This was no small task given our very diverse backgrounds but his calm demeanour, his patience and the openness, honesty, and fairness with which he led us, was what made the difference.

The plan to reform the health services was radical. It involved building up primary and secondary care and closing almost a thousand beds at the big academic hospitals. There were many sceptics of this plan but under Tom's leadership, the plan was agreed to and implemented over the rest of his term as the HOD. In 1994, the Department had 33000 staff. At the end of our reform of the health services there were 9000 fewer staff, but we were providing more services to more people throughout the province, whilst retaining the specialist expertise and medical research at the academic hospitals.

It's fair to say that that work laid the foundations for the health services that we have today in the province.

And because of this work during those heady days, thousands of people benefit from good quality health care every day in the clinics, community health centres and hospitals throughout the province. Sadly, this is not the case in most of the other provinces. Perhaps if Tom had not been the HOD we might be facing a very different reality today.

He was the right person, in the right place at the right time. And if Tom were here, he would say it was 'serendipity'. That's a word that Tom loved to use.

If he were here, he would also say, Dr Abdullah, 'remember this is not a five-day match' just to make sure that I would not make a long speech, and I would say, Dr Sutcliffe, we made a whole revolution just so that we could say all the things that we had on our minds about how to fix this country.

As a team, we had other important battles to fight too. One of these had to do with the provision of life saving treatment to people living with HIV. In the province we bucked the national trend, rejected the AIDS denialism that came from the President and National Minister of Health, and provided treatment, first to pregnant women and then to everyone who needed it.

The fallout from this decision was brutal and vicious. Tom handled the relationship with the national government with great skill and diplomacy, but the most important thing is that he backed his team to the hilt. He protected his troops. He knew it was the right thing to do and made sure that he had our backs.

I think Tom's role in this has been underestimated. Although I led the AIDS programme, Tom provided me with advice and guidance about how to proceed every step of the way. And how right we were about antiretroviral treatment. It proved life changing for millions. There are now six million South Africans on antiretroviral treatment and our department led the way to achieving this.

On a personal level, Tom took me under his wing, taught me much of what I know about management but he also taught me that the most important things in work, as they are in life, are honesty and integrity, hard work and respect for all the people you work with, regardless of their backgrounds or their views even if these views are diametrically opposed to your own.

After Tom left the Department, I saw him many times and our relationship evolved into a deep friendship, away from the hum drum of office tensions. We talked a lot about life and family, he talked about his latest book and his incredible work on the Mental Health Review Board which led to him being appointed as an Honorary Psychiatrist by the Colleges of Medicine. Most of all we talked about the worsening situation in the country that we love so much; that he loved so much. This weighed heavily on his heart.

I'll end by saying that his passing is a loss to us in the health fraternity and so we can understand a little the void he leaves in his family. Our deepest condolences go to Kathy, Vicky, Theresa, Anne, Robert, and Alison and to his many friends. Take solace in knowing that you lived your lives with a truly remarkable human being.
Rest in peace Tom Sutcliffe.

Dr Fareed Abdullah
18 April 2024

