

Daily Dispatch

OUR OPINION

Babies have a right to life

HERE is something inherently good about babies. When someone delivers a baby, it's customary to refer to a "blessing" or "bundle of joy". Under normal circumstances relatives and friends do everything possible, including purchase gifts, to ensure the bundle is well cared for.

In South Africa babies are welcomed by a beautiful gift from the founding fathers and mothers of our constitutional democracy. This gift is the Constitution and it contains significant provisions aimed at protecting children.

Section 11 states: "Everyone has a right to life". This right is not subject to conditions or qualifications. For a newborn, who has neither the means nor the capacity to survive on his/her own, this right is linked to other rights which the State is obliged to provide for in terms of the Constitution. These include access to health-care, food, water and shelter, among others.

For a newborn, basic healthcare, including the right not to be exposed to harm, such as infectious bugs, and to have the effects of these mitigated or controlled in public hospitals, is a matter of life and death. Access to these rights should be considered a "minimum core" – a phrase developed by the UN.

It is in this context that the killing of babies by the deadly bug Klebsiella at Cecilia Makiwane Hospital under circumstances which shows utter neglect on the part of hospital bosses is morally reprehensible. This record number of baby deaths – and the hospital bosses' subsequent claims that the babies were infected by HIV – exposes government's failure to live up to the constitutional injunction to care for babies and to ensure that their right to life is not sacrificed.

There is no doubt that the babies were killed under the watch of hospital managers who appear to have dragged their feet in getting the infection under control.

Also odious is that the health department, in its own version of decency, sought to keep the public in the dark. The failure to issue a public alert ensured that expectant mothers had no knowledge of the fate that awaited their babies. Out of ignorance, they delivered their babies to death.

Additionally disconcerting is the fact that government was warned about the deplorable state of health care in Eastern Cape hospitals four years ago when the Daily Dispatch exposed the death of babies in Frere, part of the Easton London Hospital Complex, to which CMH belongs.

Clearly, except for a plethora of promises, little was done to stop a repeat.

The acute lack of resources and abundance of incompetent managers coalesced to provide a fertile ground for killer bugs to thrive. But, how many more innocent babies must die on arrival, now and in future, before health managers begin to appreciate their legal and moral obligations?



Change à la Middle East a step backwards for our democracy

THE Middle East and North Africa continue to fascinate as far as socio-political developments are concerned. Not since the collapse of the Soviet Union has the world seen such a regional demand for a new order. The collapse of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and ongoing protests in Libya have given fresh life to the idea that social movements can effect change, particularly where the state is seen as an obstacle to a new order.

Having started from own initiatives within communities, and military defections in favour of protestors, the Middle East and North Africa have become an arena for the expression of mass social disquiet.

There have been subsequent noises about South Africa having its own Egypt, Tunisia, or Libya day – the main reason provided is that political parties and the leading elites seem not to take the electorate seriously and are not interested in the interests of the people. Thus increasingly desperate and despondent masses will rise up.

A regime overthrow as opposed to a change of administration is a serious matter and such a proposal should be carefully studied, particularly when it comes to South Africa.

We need to ask: Do South Africans really need to be talking about a regime overthrow?

My answer is an emphatic NO. But I think a change of administration may be entertained if we firmly believe the current administration is holding us back. A regime overthrow is the most

INSIGHT Ralph Mathekg

radical form of changing both incumbents and also the institutions through which they hold power. A change of administration entails changing the incumbents only, and leaving institutions as they are.

In South Africa there is the possibility of changing the administration and the ruling party through the vote in each and every election held.

Voting means people decide to put in power their preferred representatives. Representative democracy, by its nature, means one places one's confidence in an individual or a political party.

If the elected representative fails to honour and deliver on promises made, this does not render the election useless. Rather it means one has exercised a bad choice.

In this case, one would have to live with the decision until the next election, when a representative can be removed from his/her position.

It is important that voters do not commit the same mistake again and again by voting for representatives who are likely to disappoint them in a similar manner as previously.

The fact that South Africa has processes that allow voters to shape the results of elections should set us apart from, say, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The reason we need to reflect on our

status regarding voting and the political processes we have is because opting for a Tunisia or Egypt type of regime overthrow would actually amount to taking a step backwards in terms of our democracy.

Calling for a "Tunisia day", simply because we feel our leaders are not optimally pursuing our interests, is rather an expression of frustration.

Having agreed on institutions that will govern our processes, our inability to fully utilise them to bring about desired results does not warrant us then demolishing those institutions.

It is a sad for South Africans to continue to talk about their "Tunisia day" when they have in place an open democracy through which they can effect changes regarding who leads them.

One of the most observable phenomena in newly democratic countries such as ours is that we get really impatient as we demand radical change in our societies. However, we are not willing to bring about change by way of engaging through our institutions, but rather through the easier process of trying to demolish whatever does not work for us.

It is understandable that South Africans seem to be frustrated with government officials and even political figures at the helm of power in the country. Yet, as a nation we have effectively limited our political options to a single entity; to the extent that instead of considering voting for a party different to the ruling one, we rather threaten to destroy the institutions by

booting government out of power, à la Tunisia.

Not only is this bad for democracy, but it places too much pressure on a ruling party – it cannot be seen to make any mistakes, not even mistakes it could rectify, perhaps even after losing elections.

This approach is short-sighted and also implies that we have no regard for elections. We are saying that, throughout the entire country there are no leaders or political parties that may represent our interests better.

Even worse, we are also even saying, we ourselves as voters are incapable of forming political parties that will represent our interests. We have no confidence in ourselves, let alone our democratic processes through which leaders are elected.

The social movements that have swept through the Middle East and North Africa are an unequivocal indication that those societies do not have open and democratic processes through which the people can express their preferences. This cannot be said for South Africa, where there are open, free elections through which citizens can bring about change.

Our revolution has been a different one, and it is time for us to strengthen our institutions, not destroy them. Let the Middle East and North Africa travel their course.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR | Write to PO Box 131, East London 5200. Fax 043 743 5155. SMS 072 732 5400. E-mail: letters@dispatch.co.za

Potholes seem to disappear as elections loom closer

IT IS interesting to see how frantically workers from the King Sabata Dalindyebo Municipality and/or O R Tambo District Municipality are attempting to cover up the many potholes and dongas in the streets of Southernwood, Mthatha.

This must be in preparation for the coming elections for local government.

In my street, where I live, street lamps have been out for more than a year now. I am sure that our local councillor thinks I am quite mad for bothering him so much about the non-delivery in my area.

If it is only pre-election periods that shake our local municipality into doing something, then I suggest we separate elections for national Parliament from elections for the provincial legislature and also hold separate district and local municipal elections.

If that were the case we, in Mthatha, would have more potholes fixed and perhaps a few street lamps attended to. — Zama Gebeda, Mthatha

Unkept cemetery

I WOULD like to draw attention to the neglect and state of disrepair of the West Bank Cemetery (pictured right). This unkept scene confronts the many visitors who pass this way when visiting the landmark Hood Lighthouse, and also the hundreds of local, provincial, national and international golfers who come to enjoy the beautiful West Bank Golf Course, from where "you can see the sea from every tee".

Even more tragic, is that the cemetery is where families come to lay to rest their loved ones and honour them on their regular pilgrimages.

Since President Jacob Zuma and the government are promising to create more jobs, stimulate investment and tourism, I suggest here is an opportunity to provide meaningful work and improve the image of our city.

Perhaps with the municipal elections in the offing, the city fathers, will awaken from their slumbers or other preoccupations and demonstrate that they really do care. — Reg Mason, East London



WEST BANK CEMETERY

Caring service at hospital

I TOOK a friend to casualty at the Frere Hospital last Friday and must compliment the staff on its wonderful service and caring attitude, from the ambulance men to the casualty sister and doctor, the x-ray staff, as well as the cleaning staff. The Frere has had a lot of bad press and I think it is important that we give credit where it is due. The service was faultless, the hospital immaculate, and the staff obviously adhere to the rules of excellence which are posted on their walls. Well done, Frere! — Jill Frommolt, Stirling

New name for the birds

THE article about the proposal to rename Beacon Bay after a bird (DD, March 3) refers. Curiosity prompted me to look up this apparently iconic bird that occurs

(occurred?) in Beacon Bay. *Roberts Field Guide 2007*, based on *Roberts 7 Birds of Southern Africa*, the large, heavy "bible" of birdwatchers and ornithologists, was my reference.

Guess what? No *Kunondyilo* is listed in the Xhosa bird name index. Nor in the Zulu. Could it be a spelling mistake? I then checked every single bird name listed in both the Xhosa and the Zulu sections looking for something close to *Kunondyilo*. That produced *Unondyolo* under Xhosa names, for a bird called the Chinspot Batis (Batis molitor) which I know occurred in Beacon Bay 30 years ago.

This bird's preferred habitat is acacia/savannah which is reasonably widespread in the eastern sector of the Eastern Cape. However this habitat and this bird species is also widespread in Zimbabwe, Gauteng, Limpopo, northern Botswana, KwaZulu-Natal, Mozambique, and even northern Namibia. Far from a special Beacon Bay bird!

For goodness sake let's just stick to good old Beacon Bay. — Graham Winch, Gonubie

Is crime news withheld?

I, AND I am sure many East London residents, wonder if news regarding serious crimes is being withheld from the public in the East London police area.

Recently there was the murder of a female in Berlin and it only appeared in Wednesday's Dispatch. There was also a vicious attack on elderly residents of Gonubie days ago and still there is no report in the Dispatch.

I have the following questions for the Dispatch and police communications department:

- Is information about serious crime being withheld within the East London police area?
- When stories do appear why do they take so long?
- Is the infighting in the ANC of more importance to the public than news about a very serious crime?

At the same time I would also like to urge residents to report matters to the Dispatch reporters.

East London's own "Crime Spotter" website is also informative – both the above crimes were reported there before seeing the light in the Dispatch. — Roelf Berg, via e-mail

□ Since our core business is to inform the public it would never be in our interest to withhold news. — The Editor

Troubled waters

BUFFALO City Municipality has been in the headlines for running out of funds due to mismanagement. This month, citizens are being targeted to fund them. I received my water account yesterday by e-mail. My cost on water is double the normal amount, but there is no reading. When I queried it I was told to bring in my own reading before they can lodge a complaint.

The reading that is supposed to be on the account is for period December 15 to January 15. Now they want me to submit a reading made on March 2 (six weeks later). Go figure! — J Podges, via e-mail

ONKGOPOTSE JJ TABANE

Singing from same hymn sheet

THE attack this week by a Cabinet minister on government's head of communications must be one of the most extraordinary things to happen in the discourse of our democracy. It follows the also extraordinary debate on national television recently between General Bheki Cele and the Public Protector.

These developments are, maybe, a sign of our maturing democracy and possibly show that the ANC is beginning to open up. The readiness of Cosatu to jump to Trevor Manuel's defence and the ANC Youth League to Jimmy Manyi's shows that more and more people in the alliance are attaching value to the idea of freedom of speech and that no strictures of party discipline will be able to put a lid on the culture of open debate taking root in our country.

Aware of the controversy that his actions might spark, Manuel – commenting on something Manyi said almost a year ago – became so angry that he declared he was putting his "title aside" and speaking to Manyi "as a compatriot".

He then went on to accuse Manyi of racism. I am quite sure the party line would have dictated that he check with Manyi about the context. Anyway, the fact that Manyi's deputy at the Government Communication Information Service sent an apology on behalf of his boss seemed to inflame Manuel even further. He milked this as a half-hearted apology and went on to assault Manyi in the most extraordinary way.

If you are in the public eye amid such a storm it will always be difficult to stand up and address issues. Which is probably why the ANC Youth League jumped to the defence of Manyi. They must be well aware that such an attack does not bode well for Manyi's role as an articulator of State policy.

I must commend Manyi for not entering the fray. Imagine if he were to respond. Given his firebrand nature I shudder to see what his response to Manuel's open letter would be. But it may well go something like this....

Dear Trevor,

Maybe I have not yet been introduced to you – I am now the head of government communications and it may be a good idea, next time you want to convey something to the media, to check with me so that we can all sing from the same hymn sheet.

It behoves you to respect a director general of this government – which I am. From now on, kindly ensure that you never again take off your government minister hat when addressing another colleague. You took an oath of office to respect the Constitution of the republic and not make a mockery of its communications protocols.

You say I am racist and you jump to the defence of coloured people even when the ANC has already criticised me for the same remarks. No surprises there – the people at Luthuli House have never been good enough for you.

The ANC obviously wants to pander to coloured voters and my remarks made a year ago will obviously feed the DA's *swaart gevaar* campaigns. For this misjudgment I have already apologised and will say nothing more.

Next time I will copy you on all apologies that I will issue for future misstatements – I am sure you would not have gone on to question my struggle credentials had you seen my letter of apology.

But your letter must have pleased many in the Western Cape and elsewhere who have been waiting for any chance to discredit the suggested amendments to the Employment Equity law.

I feel you have made me a scapegoat for your failure over the years to woo coloured voters.

Insulting a colleague who you may confront in Cabinet and elsewhere was frankly very low – and in my humble view will not win us any new coloured support.

You know very well that the remarks I made were not made in my capacity as head of government communications but in my capacity as president of the Black Management Forum and that they are being brought up as an election ploy.

It was wrong of you to attack me personally but here is a tip for you Trevor – you will need me one day to defend you. One day when Cosatu comes after you and calls for your head. See you in Cabinet,

Yours
Jimmy

Onkgopotse JJ Tabane is media commentator and businessman. He writes in his personal capacity

FROM OUR FILES

MARCH 4, 1981: JUDGMENT has been reserved in the Port Elizabeth Regional Court trial of a Rhodes journalism lecturer, Mr Guy Berger, and a student, Mr Devandiren Pillay.

Yesterday the magistrate Mr J B Robinson, rejected their pleas of guilty to some of the charges of the Internal Security Act and the Publications Act saying the statements of admission contained clear denials to some of the charges.

Mr Berger, 24, and Mr Pillay, 21, originally pleaded not guilty to five of six charges.

MARCH 4, 1961: Eight years ago an East London social worker encountered a little European boy whose legs were so spastic he could not walk. His was clearly a case for the East London and Border Society for the Care of Cripples.

Today, the boy, Graham du Preez, of Longfellow Street, is able to walk with the aid of calipers and either crutches or sticks. If he had not been discovered in time his case would have been hopeless.

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