

**Keynote Address of the Minister of Health, Dr Joe Phaahla, on the  
Official Renaming of the Head Office of the Department of Health  
after Dr AB Xuma,  
Pretoria,  
Tuesday, 21 May 2024**

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Programme Director,  
DepMin Dhlomo

The Xuma family, thanks to Baba Vuyisa Xuma

The TG of the ANC and former Deputy Minister of Health

Leaders of Organised Labour present, Cde Hlongwane and Cde Maleka  
Director-General, Dr SSS Buthelezi,

Heads of various entities under the health department and also SAMA

Leaders and reps from Medical Universities

Management and staff of the NDOH

Comrade

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning

Firstly, I wish to thank members of the Xuma family for honouring us with your presence at this important and historic occasion. I must specifically thank MR Ray Xuma who was our link in communicating with the other family members, we feel really honoured. I must also thank comrade Justice Pitso who was a critical link when I first approached the ANC SG's office about 2 years ago requesting the office to discuss with the family our request to name our new headquarters after their elder. We thank the family for responding positively to our request via the ANC Headquarters.

I must also appreciate the support of my former colleague then Minister of Health Dr Zweli Mkhize who supported the proposal to name our HQ after this luminary leader of our people.

I believe that the naming of this building after this outstanding son of the soil will serve multiple purposes. One of those is that it will bring to the fore the sterling contribution made by DR Xuma and his comrades to the deepening of the content of the demands of the liberation struggle generally and more specifically in respect to the rights of black South Africans to good quality health services. Secondly DR Xuma's life is a

textbook example of determination and resilience in the quest to acquire education, knowledge and skills.

Starting with the second one of his determinations to acquire education the history of how he was prepared to take risks and his perseverance, he completed a primary school teaching diploma and taught where was under 19 years of age before leaving this country to go to the USA when he was barely 20yrs. He spent 14 years studying in the USA during which time he had to sometime work during the day and attend classes at night so that he could finance his studies.

Every university he went to he did menial jobs for either staff members or in the universities themselves including cleaning and cooking in the kitchen or else being a waiter in the restaurants. The studies were also not straightforward as he first had to pass a four-year course which would enable him to enrol at university and then enrolled for a BSC degree in Agriculture before seeking admission to medical school which was also a struggle. Once he got into medical school it was also not smooth sailing as he was excluded after not doing well in anatomy and chemistry and had to improve his grades to be readmitted. Also remember that at that time there were no flights to go abroad, he sailed on a ship for many days, they left East London in August 1913 and only arrived in USA on 20<sup>th</sup> September same year so more than 20 days on sea.

Quite remarkably when he came back to work he set up practice in the poor areas of Johannesburg, Sophiatown. Having conquered adversity himself he was very conscious of the socioeconomic conditions which brought many patients to his practice. DR Xuma therefore started his activism by taking up the struggles of the community he was serving, organising delegations to the white ruling authorities to demand improvements in the conditions of living, working alongside activists such as Charlotte Manny Maseke. He was asked in 1930 to become a part time Medical Officer for Alexander which he did for 25 years.

Driven by this aspirations and desire, DR AB Xuma began to agitate for equality in access to healthcare. Noting the racism that underpinned the healthcare service, in 1929 addressing the meeting of the British Association of Science, he argued that there was no acceptable substitute for fully trained African doctors and nurses, and appealed for the establishment of a medical school in South Africa that would open its

doors to aspiring African medical graduates. DR Xuma made this call because when he came back home he was invited by DR James McCord to come and join him at McCords Zulu Hospital to train young Zulus as Medical Assistants and he turned down the offer as he wanted Africans to be trained as full doctors like himself.

It was this social consciousness and activism which ultimately drove DR Xuma closer to the African National Congress, having also been active in the All African Convention. Before joining the ANC Dr Xuma had taken a short sabbatical to go and study Tropical Medicine and Hygiene in the UK.

DR Xuma was invited to attend the ANC conference by then SG Rev James Calata in 1939 and after joining and serving as deputy speaker of the conference, a year later in 1940 he was elected President. He used his experience in the USA and UK to modernise the ANC and gave it focus. It was through his leadership that there was a decision to develop a Bill of Rights modelled on the Atlantic Charter which was a document negotiated by USA and UK under Roosevelt and Churchill as a blueprint for ending the Second World War. Under Dr Xuma's leadership the ANC in 1942 in Bloemfontein he led the establishment of a special committee to study the Atlantic Charter which led to the drawing and adoption of the African Claims document which detailed the demands of the oppressed African people from political, economic and social rights. From the health sector this document was the first one to give a comprehensive analysis of what was wrong and what needed to be done.

The document was titled the "African Claims in South Africa, and it represented the most comprehensive statement on African rights ever issued by any organisation of the African people. The document affirmed the right of all peoples to choose their own form of government, and the Bill of Rights demanded full citizenship rights and the improvement of the socio-economic position of Africans and abolish all the discriminatory legislation.

Programme Director,

The sentiments or principles of social solidarity espoused in the NHI were first echoed in the African Claims document spearheaded by Dr AB Xuma.

It says,

*“We regard it as the duty of the state to provide adequate medical and health facilities for the entire population of the country. We deplore and deprecate the fact that the state has not carried out its duty to the African in this regard and has left this important duty to philanthropic and voluntary agencies. As a result of this gross neglect the general health of the entire African population has deteriorated to an alarming extent. We consider that the factors which contribute to this state of affairs are these:*

- the low economic position of the African which is responsible for the present gross malnutrition, general overcrowding, high mortality and morbidity rates;*
- the shortage of land resulting in the congestion in the reserves and in consequence the bad state of African’s health and the deterioration of his physique.*
- the slum conditions in the urban areas;*
- neglect of the health and the general education of the Africans;*
- neglect of the provision of water supplies, proper sanitary and other conveniences in areas occupied by Africans both in urban and rural areas.*

To remedy this state of affairs the African Claims Charter urges and demand that:

- a substantial and immediate improvement in the economic position of the African;*
- a drastic overhauling and reorganisation of the health services of the country with due emphasis on preventive medicine with all that implies in modern public health sense.*

We strongly urge the adoption of the following measures to meet the health needs of the African population:

- the establishment of free medical and health services for all sections of the population;*
- the establishment of a system of School Medical Service with a full staff of medical practitioners, nurses and other health visitors;*
- increased hospital and clinic facilities both in the rural and in urban areas;*

- *increased facilities for the training of African doctors, dentists, nurses, sanitary inspectors, health visitors, etc.;*
- *A co-ordinated control finance of health services for the whole Union;*
- *the creation of a proper system of vital statistics for the whole population including Africans;*
- *the appointment of District surgeons in rural areas with a large African population.*

Describing the African Claims as a living document for generations to come, Dr AB Xuma said: ‘...this is a legacy, and a heritage, which we will leave behind for future generations to enjoy. For it, and to them, we are all forever indebted. We realise that this is only the beginning of a long struggle, and it must be persistent and insistent. I am confident that all men and women of goodwill of all races and nations will see the justice of our cause and stand with us.’

Programme Director,

We are here today to immortalise the name of our pathfinder, our leader our mentor our President in this building. It is not a coincidence that we are doing these six days after President Ramaphosa signed the NHI Bill into law. This law as we have said before and as eloquently stated by President last Wednesday derives its origin from the African Claims of DR AB Xuma. In immortalising his name here today we are also binding ourselves to the achievements of his dreams and his goal of a complete overhaul of a discriminatory and inequitable system of health services as we still have today. We are binding ourselves to the deliberate and speedy transformation of our health system to that proposed in the African Claims, we are binding ourselves in front of his descendants.

By this renaming we also hope to inspire the staff here at our headquarters and also staff in offices and in frontline health services to emulate the commitment, fortitude, and resilience of DR Xuma in discharging our responsibilities to the public we serve, let us all be true servants of the people as he did in Sophiatown and Alexander.

As we undertake our mandate to the ordinary people of our country let us draw inspiration from what Dr AB Xuma said addressing the ANC

Conference, in December 1941, calling for dutiful and selfless members, that:

*“You and I are inheritors of these great traditions. We are debtors to their fine examples. We are called upon to copy their fine example of sacrifice. We are urged not only to build upon the foundation they laid but also to improve and modernise the plan of their structure. To do this it requires the best African brains, and I believe we have them in this country. It calls for the greatest effort and sacrifice from every man and woman of our race. It means for all of us wherever we are and whoever we are to do our duty. Congress claims us. Congress demands our best service for our people”.*

Our moment in history is to deliver what our forebears such as DR AB Xuma could only dream of, Universal Health Coverage, which is accessible, of good quality and free at the point of delivery.

I thank you.