

Malta's Health Budget, a Princess & a Tin of Peas

I read with interest Chapter 6 of the Maltese Budget 2023 relating to health. I will analyse this with the eyes of a patient and also, those of a carer, as well as a healthcare provider.

It is very encouraging to see a Health Budget teeming with brilliant proposals. However, is it possible that the yellow brick road which it purports indeed makes us miss the forest for the trees?

Whilst we are advocating new technologies and new treatments, are we acknowledging the harsh reality of patients when they face out-of-stock medicines and medical devices on a regular basis? Let us consider cataract operations. These were largely postponed during the COVID-19 pandemic ... only to hit another brick wall in the second half of 2022. Lenses and custom packs were repeatedly out-of-stock for months on end. Will you believe me when I tell you that frail octogenarian oncology patients were summoned to MDH at 7:30am for the cataract operation ... only to be told that the required lens is out-of-stock, after the A-Scan was performed? Is this fair and just on vulnerable patients (and their carers)? And is this fair and just on our dedicated surgeons and nurses who waste precious time trying to juggle around out-of-stock items? Regretfully this is what our healthcare system offers to our vulnerable patients. I understand that securing stock may be geopolitically challenging for a small island at the periphery of Europe. But is it possible that we cannot plan and manage to procure lenses and custom packs for our patients who have been waiting for the operation for months on end?

The budget document also refers to the flagship Regional Centre in Paola, named after the late Dr Vincent Moran. I knew Dr Moran through my studies. He was a stalwart socialist whom I admired immensely. I believe that if he were still with us, he would question how the Ministry intends to attain the required manpower for the Centre, including specialists and nurses, when as we speak MDH is understaffed. The chronic understaffing has in turn churned various industrial actions from trade unions in the past years. In keeping with this, even a child will understand that ultimately, having your hospital appointment postponed either because of understaffing or because of an industrial action does not really matter. The end result is the same.

Chapter 5 of the budget document also trumpets the increase in investment in e-Health and the digitalization of the

Pathology department. This is commendable. But at times what the patient actually needs is that he reaches out to a particular department at one of our centres and someone picks up the other end of the telephone and addresses his or her queries. Getting through to specific departments in our hospitals is tantamount to performing a tracheostomy on oneself with bare hands.

It is also nice to hear that urgent oncology patients will receive treatment within 12 weeks from diagnosis. It is equally nice to have navigator nurses at SAMOC. However, wouldn't it be even nicer if we manage properly the repeated shutdown of one, two or all three linear accelerators at SAMOC which invariably occur periodically. Sometimes it is because of annual servicing, and other times because of 'water seepage', and other times still, because of other breakdowns. When one or two accelerators are not functioning, patients get called in for radiotherapy sessions, nauseated and tired of living, at ridiculous times, even at 11pm. When all three accelerators are not functioning ... [Dear Reader, this is not an assumption; this actually happened last July] ... Malta's radiotherapy sessions at SAMOC are brought to a halt.

It seems that Hans Christian Andersen's fable of the Princess and the Pea is still relevant today. Seeing something which is seemingly appealing and first-class [twenty mattresses and twenty eider-down duvets] in reality could translate in the most unpleasant experience for those who are vulnerable in specific settings ...

We have seen great improvement in health services since 2013. But they need to improve much more. If there is the correct *forma mentis* in the application of the Goldilocks principle, problems become challenges which can and should be overcome.

Fortunately, my life journey made me encounter many brilliant healthcare professionals at our hospitals and centres who offer a sterling service. It is these dedicated surgeons and specialists who help mitigate the gargantuan shortcomings of our health service.

This narrative has been written through my tired eyes of carer, patient, as well as healthcare provider. It may be subjective but it is a reality, nonetheless.

I wish you a peaceful Christmas and a serene New Year firmly rooted in Ubuntu values. Keep well.

Pan Ellis