

Speech by Limpopo Premier Dr Phophi Ramathuba on the Occasion of Her Birthday Celebration & the 5th Anniversary of the Rural Health Matters Outreach Programme, Tshilidzini Hospital, Thulamela Municipality

11 August 2025

Programme Director,
MEC for Health, Ms. Dieketseng Mashego,
Acting HOD, Dr. Ntodeneni Ndwanamato,
All CEOs of our hospitals,
Doctors, nurses, and healthcare professionals,
Distinguished guests,

Ndi matsheloni, Avuxeni, Thobela, Good morning, Goie more,

There is a saying that a community without healers is like a garden without water, the seeds may be there, the soil may be rich, but without the gentle and skilled hand that nurtures life, nothing can flourish. In the same way, a community without healthcare providers cannot truly thrive. You are the custodians of life, the ones who bring relief to the suffering, hope to the hopeless, and light to those in darkness.

It always feels good to walk again in the corridors of this hospital, not as the MEC for Health as I did for many years, but now as the Premier of our province, and yet still, my heart beats with the same calling: to serve, to heal, and to make healthcare a lived reality for our people and celebrating this anniversary with the 69th anniversary of the 1956 women's march and the 5th anniversary of the Rural Health Matters outreach programme.

Today is personal to me. It is my birthday, but more importantly, it is the 5th birthday of the Rural Health Matters outreach programme. When this initiative was born in August 2020, during Women's Month, I made a conscious decision: my birthday would not be about flowers, gifts, or parties. Instead, it would be about giving back, about offering the gift of life-changing healthcare to those who need it most.

From that vision, Rural Health Matters was born. We started with a dream: to take specialist healthcare services into the rural corners of our province, where people often wait years for operations that could restore their dignity, mobility, and quality of life. And today, five years later, that dream continues to grow.

This week, from the 11th to the 15th of August 2025, we will be stationed in hospitals across the Vhembe District, here at Tshilidzini, at Elim, and Malamulele working alongside dedicated specialists in ophthalmology, orthopaedics, general surgery, urogynaecology, and gynae-oncology. These are high-demand services, and for many patients, this outreach is the answer to years of waiting.

Programme Director, since its inception, the Rural Health Matters programme has benefited more than 10,500 patients, mothers, fathers, children, grandparents, these are people whose lives have been transformed by the care they received right here, close to home. What makes this even more special is that our team includes specialists from other provinces such as Gauteng and the Free State, who give their time and expertise without expecting payment. This is the true spirit of ubuntu.

But this week is not just about performing surgeries; it is also about reminding ourselves why we are here. As public healthcare facilities, we

are the last line of defence for our people. The majority of our patients cannot afford private healthcare. They depend entirely on us, and it is our duty to ensure that the care they receive is equal to, if not better than, what they would get elsewhere.

That means living the Batho Pele principles every day. It means organising ourselves so that our patients are not left sitting in queues for hours while we all have lunch at the same time. It means dividing teams, planning carefully, and putting patients first. It means loving the people we serve because you cannot help them well if you do not love them.

Working in a hospital is unlike any other profession. In other industries, a mistake may cause inconvenience; here, a mistake can cost a life. That is why vigilance, dedication, and passion are non-negotiable. Every department, every unit, every person in the chain matters. If one part of the system slows down or fails, the whole system suffers. That is why teamwork is our lifeline.

Leadership, too, is vital. Leaders in our healthcare facilities must lead by example, by maintaining cleanliness, wearing uniforms and name tags, and creating an environment where staff feel free to raise concerns and share ideas that improve service delivery. Procurement and decision-making must always be guided by consultation and the needs of patients, not by personal preferences.

To my fellow healthcare workers: treat each patient as you would treat your own family. Remember that love heals. A warm greeting, a smile, a gentle word, these can make as much difference as the medication we prescribe. Let our facilities be like the pool of Bethesda in the Bible, where those who enter come out healed.

Let us draw inspiration from pioneers like Florence Nightingale and our own Charlotte Mannya-Maxeke, who understood that nursing and medicine are not just professions, but callings. They carried the torch for humanity, and it is now our responsibility to pass that torch to the next generation.

As we celebrate this 5th anniversary of Rural Health Matters, I hope that this week brings not just relief to the patients we serve, but a renewed spirit of dedication among all of us who work in healthcare. Let us continue to clear the backlogs, to close the gap between rural and urban healthcare, and to ensure that no one is left behind simply because they live far from the city.

To every doctor, nurse, porter, cleaner, and specialist here today, you are the reason for this programme to succeed. Your hands, your skills and your compassion are the true gifts to our people. On my birthday, I cannot think of a better present than seeing lives restored, communities healed and hope rekindled.

May we continue to shine in our corners, so that the burden of disease is lightened and the health of our province strengthened.

I thank you.