

NEWSLETTER FROM CATHY BUCKLE IN ZIMBABWE



By the light of the nurse's cellphone

8 May 2025



Dear Family and Friends

Winter gave us an early warning of its impending arrival in Zimbabwe this week, a little earlier than usual and a lot colder. When the mist of the early mornings burns off, it's beautiful out there, big blue skies beckoning us out into the sun where orange is the colour of early winter. Orange sand trails of termites as they climb ever higher into the trees and orange flowers are everywhere. Strelitzia, aloes, Cape honeysuckle and golden shower creepers are ablaze with colour. Stand in the sun a minute or two and warm up, watch the sunbirds stabbing little holes at the base of all these orange flowers to get a droplet of nectar and try and come to terms with what's happening in Zimbabwe.

For countless months we've been ringing the alarm bells, saying that hospitals have no medicine and equipment for even the most basic procedures but government aren't listening. We've been saying that if you get sick you have to buy your own pain medication and pay for every single tablet, syringe, injection, cannula, catheter, bandage, cotton wool and everything else before you will be treated. The bottom line is if you get sick and don't have money it's a death sentence and if you arrive at a government hospital after an accident nothing is guaranteed.

In recent weeks an utterly heartbreaking video clip showed up-and-coming young musician, Tatenda Pinjisi, in a hospital bed at Sally Mugabe Hospital in Harare after a car crash, begging for pain medication that they didn't have to give him. There was an electricity power cut at the time and nurses had to use the torch on a mobile phone to light the room. Tragically thirty-four-year-old Tatenda Pinjisi passed away.

Next came news that the Government's Youth Empowerment Minister happened to visit a relative in a major government hospital in Harare. He was so shocked at what he saw that he took to print saying he "felt a solemn responsibility to speak openly." The Minister said: "I visited one of our public health institutions this morning to see a relative and left deeply concerned by the conditions I witnessed. What I saw was deeply moving—a clear indication that many of our people are facing serious challenges. The growing public outcry over our healthcare system is not an exaggeration; it reflects the difficult experiences of many citizens," he said.

Polite and diplomatic words that were met with an immediate lash back in the form of a government statement which said in part: 'The Ministry of Health and Child Care has taken note of recent negative remarks circulating on social media, which appear to form part of a broader pattern of unwarranted and mischievous attacks. These comments seem to be well-orchestrated efforts aimed at selectively highlighting challenges within the public healthcare system, while deliberately overlooking the critical services still being provided—often under resource-constrained conditions—and the significant progress made in recent years.' Hmmm, we thought, significant progress when you can't even get a paracetamol tablet in hospital.

By the next day outrage to the government statement followed. One nurse wrote in response to the Ministry of Health statement: "They don't know the pain of carrying patients in stretchers or wheelchairs up 2 floors of stairs because the elevators are not working ... They don't know the pain of letting patients lie on wet blankets which reek of urine because the laundry machine is not working for 2 weeks ... Clearly, they don't know the pain we feel watching patients sick but are unable to help them because we don't have the resources to do so." The psychological trauma for nurses in Zimbabwe having to work in these conditions is palpable and just beyond words.

On the sidelines of this national crisis came the news that right now more than 4,000 nurses are being blocked from getting employment abroad because their Verification Letters and Nursing Diplomas are being withheld by the government. The nurses have paid the mandatory US\$300 fee for their documents but they are not forthcoming. Zimbabwe's Nurses Association president Enock Dongo said: "We are gravely concerned about the violation of nurses' rights. It has come to our attention that nurses who have completed their mandatory bonding are being denied their diplomas and verification letters – documents necessary for them to seek employment, locally or internationally. This is a blatant infringement of their right to choose their employer and we demand the immediate release of these documents to all eligible nurses." Nurses in Zimbabwe earn around US\$250 a month at a time when rent in small towns is around US\$400 a month. That says it all.

I end my letter this week in memory of Tatenda Pinjisi and also with the good news that journalist Blessed Mhlanga was finally granted bail this week after 72 days in pre-trial detention in prison.

There is no charge for this Letter From Zimbabwe but if you would like to donate please visit my website.

Until next time, thanks for reading this Letter From Zimbabwe now in its 25th year, and my books about life in Zimbabwe, a country in waiting.

Ndini shamwari yenyu (I am your friend)

Love Cathy 8th May 2025.

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