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Universities SA Condemns Attack on SAHPRA

Universities South Africa (USAf) condemns the call made by the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) for a march on the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA). This kind of political pressure to force SAHPRA to authorise the use of the Sputnik-V and Sinovac vaccines, seriously undermines its mandate and authority.

USAf condemns, as well, the ad hominem attack on the Chair of the SAHPRA Board, Professor Helen Rees and Chief Executive Officer, Dr Boitumelo Semete-Makokotlela. They are excellent scientists deeply committed to the wellbeing of South Africans and to upholding the role of SAHPRA as a regulatory authority.

The anxiety and disappointment related to the slow rollout of the South African vaccine programme is fully understandable but to target SAHPRA – and for that matter any other part of the national science system – with this kind of political pressure is clearly unwise, dangerous and misplaced. It is not SAHPRA that determines the vaccine procurement strategy of government.

SAHPRA ensures that newly developed health products such as vaccines, orthodox medicines, medical devices and radioactive agents for diagnostic or treatment purposes are made available for use only after rigorous analyses of the safety, efficacy and quality of such products are completed with satisfactory outcomes.

The decision by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to choose South Africa as the nation to host the first vaccine technology transfer hub to produce mRNA vaccines was shaped largely by what the WHO observed as a sufficiently developed and robust institutional, scientific and policy infrastructure to support such an endeavour. Dr Soumya Swaminathan, Chief Scientist at the WHO, made clear at a press conference that one of the reasons for the choice of South Africa was its regulatory infrastructure led by SAHPRA.

South Africa is a multi-layered, complex democracy and it requires a strong, robust science system for its effective functioning. Regulatory institutions such as SAHPRA are central to this purpose. Undermining them weakens the capacity of this democracy to take seriously the safety of its people from dangerous health products.

South Africa's science system, though small in international terms, is a strong, mature system that is central to South Africa's development trajectory and to addressing the challenge of creating an inclusive, growing economy. Undermining one part of that National System of Innovation (NSI) weakens the entire system. The universities are a very large part of the NSI and it is in this context that USAf comes out in defence of SAHPRA. It is an essential part of the national science system and it must be protected to perform its regulatory work without undue political influence whether that may come from government, political parties or other sources.

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