

Did the Health Professions Council trade cash for qualifications?

By [Roxy de Villiers](#)

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The Special Investigating Unit (SIU) is awaiting the president's go-ahead to investigate allegations that Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) employees may have taken bribes in exchange for medical registrations and board exam passes.



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HPCSA ombud Munyadziwa Kwindu recently revealed the allegations while speaking at a symposium held by the Wits Students' Bioethics Society. The head of SIU communications Nazreen Pandor confirmed that the unit has applied to the Office of the Presidency to begin investigating the beleaguered health regulator. Legislation requires the SIU to obtain this kind of approval via the department of justice for each inquiry it launches.

If allegations prove true, it may mean that people who were not qualified to provide medical care were fraudulently given HPCSA registration numbers that could have allowed them to masquerade as healthcare professionals and bill medical aids.

The HPCSA says it has already supplied the SIU with requested information and documentation pertaining to the allegations, according to HPCSA head of communications, Priscilla Sekhonyana. She declined to comment on how many officials were under investigation or whether any had faced disciplinary action.

Although allegations of bribery at the council are a revelation, it is not the first time the HPCSA has been under investigation.

Nothing new

In 2015, Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi appointed a ministerial task team to look into maladministration, irregularities, mismanagement and poor governance at the council. The team concluded the council was in "in a state of multi-system organisational dysfunction" and that staff reported that some funds were unaccounted for in part because of a dysfunctional accounting system.

A year later, the body fulfilled one of the task team's recommendations, parting ways with its CEO and a contract with a consultancy firm to help the HPCSA implement a turnaround strategy is expected to end later this year.

The proposed SIU investigation may be the latest signal from the state watchdog that it is getting serious about corruption in the healthcare sector.

In 2018, SIU head advocate Andy Mothibi announced that the body would create a special anti-corruption forum for the health sector, which he says would include civil society. An attorney with the public interest law organisation Section27, Nkululeko Conco, confirmed that the National Health Anti-Corruption Forum has been launched and now includes Section27 as well as the National Prosecuting Authority and the non-profit Corruption Watch. Pando says the forum has already received multiple complaints.

But Conco says it's not enough that the newly created forum responds to complaints and cautions that we can't always be reactive. He says once we've dealt with corruption, we need to ensure it doesn't happen again, otherwise, it makes investigations into it meaningless.

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