From knowledge to action: facilitator's remarks at the release of SAHR 2025

Remarks by **Noluthando Ndlovu**, Acting Director: Research and Implementation Science, Health Systems Trust, at the release of the *South African Health Review* 2025, *Learning health systems: from knowledge to action*.

01 Opening remarks

Let me begin with a picture rather than a statistic.

Somewhere in Ekurhuleni this morning, a community health worker is working out a better way to reach a patient who has stopped collecting their medication. In a rural clinic, a midwife is changing how she runs a busy labour ward after a difficult week. In the Cape Winelands, a sub-district team is looking at last month's data and rethinking its outreach.

Each of them is learning something important today. Most of what they learn will never travel beyond their own facility or team. That gap, between what our health system knows and what it actually does, is what this edition of the *South African Health Review* is about.

This is Volume 28 of the Review, published by Health Systems Trust. It is peer-reviewed and open access: free to download, free to quote and free to teach from. We want it to be used.

This year's edition, *Learning health systems: from knowledge to action*, brings together 18 papers guest-edited by Professor Lucy Gilson and Dr Nonhlanhla Nxumalo. It is built around what is often called the know-do gap. Our system generates a great deal of data, experience and innovation. Too little of it travels, and too little of it changes practice.

HST publishes this Review because it sits in both worlds. We publish evidence, and we work alongside district and facility teams every day, where we see good work stay local far too often. One of the papers in this edition describes HST's own Good Practices Repository, our attempt to

stop that from happening. In the same spirit, we see the Review itself as part of the answer: free, open, and written largely by people working inside the system.

The 18 papers sit in five sections:

01	Why learning matters
02	Turning information into action
03	Learning as a social process
04	Learning through implementation and experimentation
05	Learning in the face of emerging priorities

02 The questions we set out to answer

I invited participants to hold five questions in mind through the session:

01 **Why does learning matter in South African health systems?**

02 **How can data, evidence and experience improve decision-making?**

03 **How do dialogue, trust and collaboration create better solutions?**

04 **How does improvement actually happen, through doing, testing, mentoring and adapting?**

05 **How do our health systems adapt to emerging risks and changing needs?**

We heard first from Dr Ntombi Sigwebela, Chief Executive Officer of Health Systems Trust, who welcomed participants. Dr Nonhlanhla Nxumalo, guest editor and Director of the Centre for Health Policy at the University of the Witwatersrand, presented the key findings of the 18 papers. Professor Lucy Gilson, guest editor and Emeritus Professor at the University of Cape Town, looked ahead to the benefits of strengthening learning in the health system and the pathways for getting there. Mr Mbulelo Cabuko, Director for Health Information Systems (on behalf of Ms Thulile Zondi) at the National Department of Health, responded on behalf of the Department.

03 Closing remarks

One question from the audience captured the spirit of the morning: why have the lessons learnt over the years not been implemented at scale, and what needs to be done? That is the know-do gap in a single sentence, and it is the question this edition asks all of us to take back to our own work.

We did not answer our five questions fully in ninety minutes. But if there is one thing to take away, it is that learning is not something that happens after the work. It is part of the work.

> **“Learning is not something that happens after the work. It is part of the work.”**
>
> NOLUTHANDO NDLOVU, HEALTH SYSTEMS TRUST

I thank our speakers, Dr Sigwebela, Dr Nxumalo, Professor Gilson and Mr Cabuko; the authors of all 18 papers; our peer reviewers; the editorial and production team at HST; and our funders, without whom this Review would not be possible.

I have one ask of every reader. Download this edition, use it, and share it with your teams. And consider the question I put to participants at the start: ***what is one thing your team learnt this year that nobody outside your facility or office knows about?*** If you have an answer, share it with us through HST's Good Practices Repository, so that it stops being local knowledge.