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Eastern Cape healthcare has collapsed: ‘Sick people are fighting each other’

City Press

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MEC for Health Sindiswa Gomba and Minister of Health Dr Zweli Mkhize after a meeting in Port Elizabeth in April.
Picture: Mkhusele Sizani

The Eastern Cape healthcare system has collapsed, say doctors and healthcare workers who are employed in the province.

“We are sitting with a situation where patients are lying in the corridors of hospitals like Livingstone in Port Elizabeth and are dying, and there may soon be a similar situation at Dora Nginza in Zwide,” a doctor told City Press’ sister publication, Rapport.

Many of them need oxygen, but there is not enough for everyone

Eastern Cape Doctor

“Many of them need oxygen, but there is not enough for everyone. So, those without oxygen are fighting those who do have it to try to ‘steal’ it. Sick people are fighting each other. It is literally a ‘survival of the fittest’ situation. It is awful,” said the distraught doctor.

Another doctor said the maternity unit of Dora Nginza hospital was close to collapse.

There are not enough hands to care for everyone.

Eastern Cape Doctor

“There are not enough hands to care for everyone. These poor people; we feel so sorry for their families because nobody can enter the hospital. So, there are no witnesses to what is really going on, except us medical personnel.

“Families have no idea what their loved ones are really going through. There is not a single healthcare worker who will ever be the same after this thing. We are emotionally broken.”

The doctors spoke to Rapport on condition of anonymity, fearing being fired for speaking out about the conditions in the Eastern Cape.

They said nothing had come of the promises made by the Eastern Cape department of health. Weeks ago, the department pledged to appoint more personnel, but nothing has happened. The same went for its promise to avail staff of additional personal protective equipment.

There are only two state ambulances currently servicing the whole of Port Elizabeth. In addition, there is a major shortage of basic medical necessities, such as adult nappies.

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“And, as if that is not enough, one really has to put in an effort and keep fighting to get anything done,” said the doctors. “Even simple things, like arranging an ambulance to take a patient from one hospital to another, takes hours.”

This comes amid warnings from experts – including Professor Lungile Pepeta, dean of Nelson Mandela University’s faculty of health sciences – that the number of Covid-19 cases in the Eastern Cape could double within the next 10 days.

By Friday night, 21 938 cases and 371 deaths had been recorded in the province.

In a report released this week by the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, it is projected that the Eastern Cape will have 441 000 cases by the middle of next month, of which 78 400 will be symptomatic. The report goes on to estimate that there will be 1 080 deaths and that 480 Covid-19 patients will require intensive care.

However, providing this kind of care had already become problematic this week.

“By Wednesday, there were already 49 patients in Port Elizabeth who required admission to intensive care units [ICUs], but there were only 35 beds available. That includes both the public and the private sector,” said Pepeta.

We are now sitting with a situation in which ICU beds will have to be made available by request

Professor Lungile Pepeta, dean of Nelson Mandela University’s faculty of health sciences

Pepeta was recently appointed as chairperson of the Council for Medical Schemes, and was recently invited by Eastern Cape Premier Oscar Mabuyane to assess the Covid-19 situation in the province.

Pepeta said: “We are now sitting with a situation in which ICU beds will have to be made available by request, and that is not only in respect of the public sector. The Reverend Dr Elizabeth Mamisa Chabula-Nxiweni Field Hospital, which will officially open on July 1, will be able to accommodate a further 1 485 general beds for Covid-19 patients. But they still do not have all the equipment they need, or the necessary personnel to care for all the patients. Most of the hospitals in the Eastern Cape are already full.”

Andre Bothma, head manager of Netcare’s hospital division in the Eastern Cape, confirmed on Friday that the group’s Greenacres Hospital in Port Elizabeth and Cuyler Hospital in Uitenhage would halt all elective surgeries for the time being.

“We have made the decision so we can make more beds available in the ICU for Covid-19 cases, because we expect a drastic increase in the province,” said Bothma.

“This decision will be implemented from this week, and operations at these facilities will only be carried out in exceptional cases.”

The province is currently in the process of finalising a service level contract to work in conjunction with Netcare, as has already been done in the Western Cape and Gauteng.

Doctors at state hospitals say this cooperation will help, but it is most likely too late.

Pepeta has recommended that medical students be used to provide Covid-19 care.

One of our greatest challenges is the large number of healthcare workers who have had to go into quarantine

Professor Lungile Pepeta, dean of Nelson Mandela University's faculty of health sciences

"They have to do practical work anyway and we need them right now. That also goes for students who are being trained as emergency services employees. And anyone who is willing to work as a volunteer should not, under any circumstances, be elderly or themselves be a high-risk case – otherwise it just causes further complications.

"One of our greatest challenges is the large number of healthcare workers who have had to go into quarantine in case they test positive for Covid-19."

According to Pepeta, education about Covid-19 in rural areas and informal settlements requires urgent attention because residents there often do not have access to news or to the necessary preventative measures required to stop the spread of the virus.

Sizwe Kupelo, spokesperson for the Eastern Cape health department, said he was "unaware" of the aforementioned problems in hospitals, and that nobody had spoken to him about it.