

Protest cripples govt hospitals

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MANZINI – The number of deaths could go up in the country as only one out of all government hospitals and health centres is able to offer medical assistance at night.

This is because anaesthetists in the other government health institutions are on a protest and they do not inform the on-call doctors to attend to patients at night.

The only government hospital which functions at night is Mbabane.

According to insiders, the anaesthetists made the resolution about a fortnight ago and since then, patients had been turned back from the government hospitals and health centres.

Facilities

The affected health facilities include Mankayane Government Hospital, Hlatikhulu Government Hospital, Nhlanguano Health Centre and Mkhuzweni Health Centre, to mention a few.

This means patients cannot be operated on in the regional hospitals but have to be transferred to the Mbabane Government Hospital.

The source said the main issue was that government said it did not have money to pay on-call allowances.

This was a result of a government resolution to reduce the budget for on-call staff which was cut down from E120 million to around E70 million.

Following that, the source said government decided to reduce the number of staff members in the on-call shifts.

Schedules

He said the Ministry of Health issued an order that new working schedules should be made in the hospitals.

However, after the working schedules were amended, the source said it affected nurses and anaesthetists as doctors' shifts remained unchanged. The source said this did not go down well with both the nurses and anaesthetists as their working hours were reduced, something which would impact negatively on their salaries.

"It was for that reason that anaesthetists decided not to call on-call doctors when patients seek

their assistance at night," he said.

He said instead of calling the on-call doctors, the anaesthetists told them to go to Mbabane Government Hospital. He said about two for weeks now, patients who needed medical assistance at night had to travel from all the corners of the country to Mbabane.

The Swaziland Democratic Nurses Union (SWADNU) Secretary General Sibusiso Lushaba confirmed the matter. He said there were currently no nurses working in the theatre at night.

He said they were worried because information that reached his office was that there had been casualties in the process. He said some patients died along the way to Mbabane Government Hospital.

On the same note, SWADNU President Bheki Mamba said they had tried to arrange a meeting with the ministry but their efforts proved to be futile as they did not receive any correspondence to their requests. He said at the end of April 2019, they wrote a letter to the principal secretary's office about the matter and there was no response.

Exhaust

Meanwhile, Director of Health Services Vusi Magagula confirmed that they had downed tools. He said the union failed to exhaust all communication channels before resolving to the decision they took. He added that all grievances should be channelled appropriately by the concerned.

On the other hand, the Minister of Health, Senator Lizzy Nkosi, said she was not aware that they had downed their tools. She said in as far as she was concerned, the schedule was changed for all on-call staff members, including doctors.

She said according to her understanding, maybe the nurses and anaesthetists were aggrieved that the new schedule did not give them the working hours they used to get.

It is worth noting that early last year; this publication reported that in just six months, doctors and other health practitioners were paid E54.3 million for on-call and standby. On that note, the nurses' union highlighted that some doctors were allegedly claiming over E1m each at the end of the year for on-call duties.