

Media statement: KZN Forensic pathology (medico-legal) mortuary services operating optimally

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The medico-legal mortuaries in the province of KwaZulu-Natal are operating optimally and post-mortems are being done in spite of the strike action currently underway.

During the commencement of the strike a number of our workers who assist pathologists in performing post-mortems joined and the department discovered that; (i) generators were switched off, (ii) fridges were disconnected, (iii) identification tags were removed from bodies, (iv) tools were missing and (v) registers were missing. This was not only at Magwaza Mapahalala (Gale) Street mortuary, but in other mortuaries as well in the Durban and Pietermaritzburg areas. At an initial stage the department, together with the South African Police Force, were of the view that these acts were linked to the on going strike and given that the work done at the mortuaries relates to assisting the criminal justice system; investigations had to be instituted to ascertain if these acts did/ or not interfere with on-going investigations; thus amounting to criminal acts.

The Member of Executive Council of a province is obliged, within national policy and in terms of Regulation of the National Health Act, 2003 (Act No. 61 of 2003) to ensure that a Forensic Pathology Service is established within the respective provincial Department of Health. The forensic pathology services are charged with "obtaining information that is relevant to the medico-legal investigation of a death". On the basis of the National Health Act and its regulations the Department of Health took over the running of all forensic pathology mortuaries in 2006.

A number of mortuaries were in a state of dilapidation and other required refurbishments. Since taking over the department had to; (i) refurbish the state of the buildings, (ii) build new mortuaries as many were located in police stations and others were not coping with increasing numbers, (iii) take decisions around the staffing including auditing their skills, knowledge and competencies; and lastly (v) ensure that there was not disruption during the take over of service provision.

In June, construction of the biggest mortuary in Pietermaritzburg (to replace the Alexander Street mortuary) to accommodate more than 400 bodies was completed. The refurbishments and building of new mortuaries were done at the cost of R54,3 million and R180,9 million in the 2008/9 and 2009/10 financial years, respectively. Refurbishments to old mortuaries that have been completed include; Harding, New Hanover, Pinetown, Richards Bay and Magwaza Mapahalala (Gale) Street. We have also replaced mortuaries in Newcastle, Port Shepstone and Greytown. New mortuaries have been built in the areas of Madadeni, Escourt, Park Rynie, Eshowe, Pietermaritzburg and Dundee.

"On taking over; the forensic pathology mortuaries had a number of challenges which were not limited to physical infrastructure, and that could not be addressed overnight. We are in the process of rethinking and engaging a number of stakeholders with a view of coming up with a service that is professional and caring. This process could not be top down and required that we rally the support and cooperation of staff who were working in the service for sometime" the Head of Department (HoD), Dr Sibongile Zungu, explains.

She further explained that the core values that the department wants espoused throughout the service are; professionalism, compassion, integrity and respect. The department provides a service primarily to the criminal justice system and secondary the families of the bereaved which the department wants to assure professional services as the department strives for excellence.

"Fundamental to the turn around is training managers to be able to provide a service that is caring and professional to the justice system and the families of the deceased who, in many instances, have been lost under traumatic circumstances. We will also provide in-service training to all our staff (assistants) whilst we engage tertiary institutions for formal education training to ensure career

pathing. On the other hand, we need a structure to support the strategy which we are busy finalizing and that has budgetary implications" added the HoD.

The department wishes to assure the public that the situation in forensic pathology mortuaries has been returned to some level of normality. The department thanks the assistance of the South African Police Force who spared their members to assist in performing post mortems so that all backlogs in post mortems were dealt with.

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