

# Extortion: Chilling calls leave doctors on edge

- Security cranked up after ‘hitman’ demands R5,000 or more from medical practitioners

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Doctors are under siege in Nelson Mandela Bay and have had to step up security and deploy armed guards as they are mercilessly targeted by criminals demanding protection fees.

Life Mercantile Hospital issued a warning to its staff on Wednesday that its doctors were being targeted by extor-

tion gangs demanding payments of R5,000 or more.

Hospital manager Pat Lubobo wrote in a letter to doctors that they had received reports of medical practitioners getting phone calls from an alleged hitman who claimed to have been hired to kill a doctor.

“The caller then demands a payment of R5,000 (this may vary) in exchange for the alleged telephonic recording of the people who have ordered the hit,” Lubobo wrote.

“Our doctors, employees, healthcare workers and patient safety are of paramount importance to us, and

we are engaging with the building owners, SKG Properties, to discuss measures to improve security at the hospital.

“We encourage you to stay vigilant when entering or leaving the hospital and while driving.

“Kindly report anything that

is suspicious or alarming to the security officers on site or to the hospital manager,” the letter, seen by The Herald, says.

The hospital manager further urged staff to remain calm should they receive a phone call from the alleged hitman, and not to engage in any arguments.

Lubobo said such incidents should be reported to the nearest police station immediately.

Life Healthcare regional manager Adriaan Jordaan confirmed the authenticity of the letter, explaining it was sent out to all Life Mercantile Hospital doctors following reports from some staff that they had received threatening phone calls.

“The safety of our doctors, staff and patients remains a priority, and we are engaging with all stakeholders to ensure security levels within the hospital are maintained.

“We encourage our doctors to



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| be vigilant and alert at all times, and to report any suspicious activity to the SAPS.”  | from his Kwazakhele surgery.   | “I’ve had to take drastic measures since the last incident,” she said.  | She said she had no choice but to continue working.   | Motherwell practitioner Dr Ntsika Qupe is also living in fear.                                     | ging.   |
| Jordaan confirmed a case had been reported to the police.  | A ransom demand of R500,000 was later made.  | “I now have a private   | “I have a family to support and I need to keep my practice running.   | “My practice is still open and I still go to work to see patients but I am afraid I might be next. | “We’re now seeing a disturbing trend of targeted attacks on healthcare professionals. It’s as if we’ve become easy targets,” Ntsika said.   |
| The Eastern Cape has seen a surge in extortion gangs, with some children as young as 11 allegedly running their own gangs in Bay primary schools.    | According to the Hawks, R50,000 in cash was also stolen from Nqini’s vehicle.  | Security guard at my practice because the township is just not safe.  | “So, I’m just there, day in and day out, doing my best to provide care while feeling constantly vulnerable. | “Colleagues in the industry are targeted all too often.  | Police spokesperson Lieutenant-Colonel Siphokazi Mawisa declined to give details about the alleged threats to doctors, and would not confirm if Mercantile Hospital or its doctors had reported a case. |
| Meanwhile, doctors in the townships are running scared and have either had to shut down their practices or hire additional security at a hefty cost. | He was later rescued, physically unharmed.   | “I have to constantly be on the lookout, looking out the window to see if anyone watching or targeting us. is’ It s a constant state of [unease]. | “I know it’s not ideal but it’s the only way and yet I still don’t feel safe right now.                     | “This thing needs to be stopped and it all starts with more hands on deck from the police.         |   |
| Last month, general practitioner Dr Bongani Nqini, 55, was abducted at gunpoint  | Living in fear that she could be targeted for a second time, Kwazakhele doctor O O Adebisi, who declined to give her first name, has beefed up security and deployed armed guards at her practice. | “I was held at gunpoint by four men just the other day.   | “The thought of going through something like that again is too much.  | “We are working and living in absolute fear. These criminals are heartless.                        | “Due to the sensitive nature of these extortion cases, the police have decided not to disclose any information so as to protect the complainants and their families,” she said.                         |
|  | Adebisi said she was recently held at gunpoint.  | “It was a terrifying experience that I’m still recovering from.”  | “I hope that one day the situation improves, and I can practise without fear.”                              | “It’s no longer just about the occasional robbery or mug-  |   |

Meanwhile, further afield in the Eastern Cape, the Mthatha Ophthalmology Medical Practice announced its permanent closure earlier this month due to “the hostile criminal activities in the area”.



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