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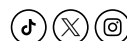
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Motsoaledi outraged at failures highlighted in health ombud's damning hospital report

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Health Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi described the actions of some healthcare workers as "criminal".

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Health ombud investigations have revealed systemic negligence, leadership failures, and severe professional misconduct, including record falsifications, at two medical facilities in Johannesburg and Limpopo.

Health Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi described the actions of some healthcare workers as “criminal”.

The reports recommended systemic reforms at Pietersburg Provincial Tertiary Hospital in Limpopo and Wits Donald Gordon Medical Centre in Johannesburg.

Health Ombud Taole Mokoena has released two damning investigation reports that contain details of systemic negligence, administrative failure, and alleged criminal misconduct at private facility, Wits Donald Gordon Medical Centre in Johannesburg, and state institution, Pietersburg Provincial Tertiary Hospital in Limpopo.

Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi, who was present at the release of the reports on Tuesday, described the conduct of some health workers as “unforgivable” and “criminal”.

The Donald Gordon Medical Centre case relates to the death of cancer patient Edward Tawa Mabubula, who sought treatment for a blocked chemotherapy port at the famed cancer hospital in 2021, but ended up dying of a severe air embolism and stroke after the port was flushed and air entered his bloodstream, according to the report.

The Pietersburg Provincial Tertiary Hospital case, according to the report, entailed severe neglect of Pitsi Eliphuz Ramphele, whose aunt, Dr Mamphela Ramphele, lodged the ombud complaint earlier this year.

Ramphele's case

The ombud's investigation into the death of Ramphele revealed cascading failures beginning at Rethabile Community Health Centre before extending to Pietersburg hospital.

Ramphele, who had an obstructed bowel, waited nearly four hours to receive a file at the clinic, a delay that proved its basic administrative dysfunction, the ombud said.

Nurses at the facility were not familiar with triage protocols, resulting in Ramphele not being prioritised or seen by a doctor. Security personnel instructed patients to go home in the afternoon after the doctors knocked off for the day.

The failures were compounded at Pietersburg hospital, where Ramphele was not properly triaged, medical interns made unsupervised clinical decisions, and he was left unmonitored for 21 hours despite his deteriorating condition, according to the report.

Critical nursing omissions included a failure to maintain an intravenous line and the absence of an intake and output chart.

According to the ombud, doctors “missed an opportunity” to identify the need for urgent surgical intervention - an omission the report stated may have prevented his death.

A post-mortem exam later confirmed small bowel perforations and peritonitis, leading to septic shock.

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One of the most serious findings was the deliberate falsification of medical records at Pietersburg hospital.

The ombud found that two nurses, RL Makhubela and AM Thobejane, had falsified and backdated documents to conceal their failure to transfer Ramphele from the clinic to the hospital. The report concluded that they committed professional misconduct and a "criminal act."

The ombud also highlighted leadership and governance failures at both facilities, with 80% of managers acting in posts without formal appointment or authority, creating "conditions that undermine leadership effectiveness".

Mabubula's case

At the Donald Gordon Medical Centre, the ombud found severe lapses in clinical governance and teamwork during Mabubula's care.

The hospital "failed to demonstrate a multidisciplinary approach" to his care, with inaccuracies and misleading entries in records amounting to professional misconduct.

The report indicated that the ICU team failed to align its management plan with that of kidney specialists, and crucial documentation revealed inconsistent or absent reviews by senior specialists.

According to the report, Mabubula's deteriorating condition on 30 and 31 October 2023 was managed in a fragmented manner, with delayed decision-making compromising his safety.

The ombud concluded that Donald Gordon failed to uphold prescribed standards of care, leadership oversight was inadequate, and the hospital lacked mechanisms to enforce protocol compliance.

'This needs very serious punitive measures'

Responding to the reports, Motsoaledi condemned the outcomes and was particularly outraged by what had happened to Ramphele.

"Even as an intern 41 years ago, I would not have treated a patient this way," he said.

In Ramphele's case, Motsoaledi said: "Senior doctors provisionally diagnosed adhesive intestinal obstruction and still treated the patient this way... those doctors took 21 hours before seeing him. It can't be forgiven."

Motsoaledi dismissed any justification related to staff shortages or equipment limitations at Pietersburg hospital.

"This has got nothing to do with lack of equipment or staffing... How do you describe a nurse who falsifies records and says it's because of staff shortages? That nurse is a criminal!"

He was equally scathing about doctors who allegedly left before attending to all patients at the Limpopo hospital.

"In this profession, you cannot say, 'It's 4 o'clock, I'm knocking off,' when patients are still there. We have never done that."

For Motsoaledi, the failure to perform basic triage, which is considered a cornerstone of emergency care, was "completely unforgivable".

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Motsoaledi also said that he, for the first time, must disagree with the ombud's report's non-punitive framing of consequences for the staff involved.

"I have never differed with the health ombud before, but today I must express my differences. This cannot be regarded as correctable only. This needs very serious punitive measures."

Motsoaledi said he would monitor whether the Health Professions Council of SA and the SA Nursing Council take action against the implicated practitioners.

"Can such a person continue being in the system as a nurse? What else can they falsify?"

‘Multi-system organ failure’

The minister likened the Limpopo clinic and hospital's performance to a critically ill body.

"If the two facilities were a human being, I would diagnose them as suffering from multi-system organ failure, because almost everything did not go well."

He recounted his experience as a lone rural doctor performing emergency procedures under pressure, but always prioritising patient survival.

"Not a single woman died in my hands because we were determined that the patient must live," Motsoaledi said.

Both reports recommend corrective action and systemic strengthening. However, Motsoaledi insisted that corrective measures alone would not restore public trust.

"Other health workers must see that they must never do something like this," he said.

The Department of Health is expected to announce its implementation plan and disciplinary processes once it has studied the ombud's recommendations.

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