

## Public Health in the News

### Women on front lines as Free State health crumbles

The Free State Health Department has lost almost a quarter of its doctors in the last year. Newly released Free State health indicators show all is not well in the troubled province as the province lost an unprecedented 177 medical doctors in the last year. The number of doctors working in public health in the Free State has plunged from 716 in 2014 to just 539 this year. The province has also lost 28 medical specialists over the past year. This is according to the Personal and Salary Administration System (Persal), Treasury's central system that pays public sector workers, quoted in the Health Systems Trust's annual SA Health Review (SAHR) released last night.

The Free State now has 23.3 doctors per 100,000 patients. Its doctors in primary healthcare facilities have the worst workloads in the country. A doctor in the Xhariep district (Trompsburg) is expected to treat 55 patients a day, while the provincial average is 32 patients a day. The national average is 27 patients per day.



At Welkom's Bongani Regional Hospital, the strain is beginning to show with deadly consequences for Free State women. The 460-bed Bongani Regional Hospital has 26 doctors and 10 specialists, two of which are dedicated to the obstetrics and gynaecology department, according to Free State Department of Health Spokesperson Mondli Mvambi.

In the last year, the Free State's maternal mortality has risen by about 50 percent, according to the District Health Barometer. Over the same period, the province has lost about 25 percent of its doctors, although the Free State Department of Health says it has started recruiting new doctors as well as contracting private doctors to help fill in.

The publication also noted that, as the numbers of doctors falls, deaths are climbing. The Free State has the second worst maternal mortality rate in the country and the numbers of women who die during or soon after pregnancy is almost twice the national average, according to the latest District Health Barometer.

In October, the death of five infants at Bongani hospital led to a full investigation by the Office of Health Standards Compliance. The office's initial statement on the incident cited the probable cause of death as the Klebsiella bacteria. Transmission of the bacteria can be linked to poor hygiene, and in health care settings it can be spread from person-to-person via the contaminated hands of healthcare personnel, according to the US Centres for Disease Control.

The Free State has been beset with health service delivery problems, leading to human rights organisations such as the Treatment Action Campaign and Section27 campaigning for the resignation of the MEC.

Aside from the Free State, Mpumalanga is the only other province that has fewer doctors now than a year ago (a decrease of 39, from 875 to 836). Countrywide, there were only 63 new doctors entering public health this year.

Limpopo has also seen an exodus of specialists and now only has 80 across the entire province (down from 92 last year). This translates into 1.5 specialists per 100,000 people – the lowest in the country. The Northern Cape lost three specialists in the past year, and is now down to 26 for the entire vast province. It is also the only province to record a decrease in the number of professional nurses (a loss of 157 nurses, making a provincial total of 4 337). Although 133 127 professional nurses are registered with the SA Nursing Council nationally, only slightly more than half (68 105) work in public health.

Sources: *Health-E News*, 08 Dec and 21 Oct 2015

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