



3/4/2013 12:07:03 AM

Hospital doctors fear for their lives

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Scores of South African doctors would eventually move into the private sector or leave the country should the national department of health fail to guarantee the safety of health professionals in government hospitals, the South African Medical Association (Sama) warned on Sunday.

This comes after several violent attacks at public health institutions in the past few months.

Last week a Durban man was shot dead at the King Edward hospital, allegedly by a former colleague.

According to sources the King Edward employee was shot dead by a fellow employee who had faced a disciplinary process on the day of the shooting. The man had come to the hospital to collect his dismissal letter and then shot the staffer who was handling the labour dispute for the hospital. Police investigations are currently underway.

The family of the deceased was informed and counselling services were rendered by hospital psychologists to them and staff members of the hospital.

Sama spokesperson, Dr Phophi Ramathuba, said the organisation was in constant talks with the department on the improvement of security in public health institutions.

However, she said the department was dragging its feet on implementing security plans in public hospitals.

"We have spoken to the minister about the issue, we have had meetings with various HODs and MECs and they all agreed Sama was right about the extra security measures but they are not implementing anything. Each day that goes by without anything being done means somebody at a hospital is at risk. More and more doctors are leaving the public sector, opting to work in their own practices," Ramathuba said.

She said doctors across the country were working in fear and "constantly watching their backs" after the recent attacks on medical professionals reported in the media. "We are exposed to life-threatening situations occasionally, especially when treating members of gangs," Ramathuba said.

She urged the ministry of police to consider placing police officers at government hospitals instead of hiring security companies.

The spokesperson for the Junior Doctor's Association of South Africa, Kalli Spencer, said the association was also concerned about the violent attacks on medical staff.

He said junior doctors often had to walk around hospitals during the night without anyone to escort them.

Kalli said more CCTV cameras needed to be installed and more security guards placed at key points around hospitals to ensure the safety of doctors and nurses.

"It would help to get security that would escort us around the hospitals because we don't know what's lurking in the dark at night," Spencer said.

Joe Maila, the spokesperson for the national health department, said the department was trying its best to improve security at its state hospitals.

“We take security of our health professionals seriously, it’s a non-negotiable.

“Even when we do our budgeting, security is a priority, we are doing the best we can as a department to ensure our staff is safe during working hours,” Maila said.

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