

Minister against closure of labs

LABORATORIES should not be closed down under any circumstances because the service they provide is essential, according to Minister of Health Aaron Motsoaledi. He was responding to the closure of 10 laboratories by the National Health Laboratory Service because of dire financial constraints. The service is the largest diagnostic pathology service in South Africa and supports national and provincial health departments. The service is owed more than R2-billion by provincial departments. KwaZulu-Natal has yet to cough up more than R1-billion and Gauteng more than R700-million. Motsoaledi said he would hold urgent meetings with the board of the laboratory service to discuss its move. He said laboratories should not be closed at all, regardless of what problems there were. Though KwaZulu-Natal has been named as the biggest defaulter, the Minister said the province and the laboratory had been locked for a long time in a "serious dispute" about rates. The province started using the laboratory service last year and reported a 300 percent increase in its fees. Motsoaledi appointed retired judge Jerome Ngwenya to arbitrate the matter last month. He has until the beginning of March to "unravel" the problem. Should Ngwenya find against the province, Motsoaledi said, there was enough money to settle the R1-billion bill with the National Health Laboratory Service. Chris Maxon, a spokesman for the KwaZulu-Natal department of health, said it was aware the service intended to close laboratories and assured the public that the provision of healthcare would not be allowed to be compromised "no matter what decision the NHLS adopts". Gauteng has not paid its bill reportedly because of its own cash flow problems. The laboratory service's CEO, Sagie Pillay, said it was trying to contain the crisis by closing down laboratories and moving staff to other sites. The service has 268 laboratories across the country. Should the situation not improve, another 20 laboratories face closure. Pillay said while the laboratories did not have a backlog, the crisis would have an impact on the turnaround time of results.

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