

Staff shortage plea at Port Elizabeth hospitals disputed

THE head of the Eastern Cape's health department, Siva Pillay, has stepped in to try and resolve a crisis at the Port Elizabeth Hospital Complex, which has seen three senior doctors threatened with disciplinary action after they blew the whistle on staff shortages and announced that the institution would stop all elective surgery. The fact that the doctors were threatened with disciplinary action triggered widespread media coverage, and was widely condemned by fellow doctors from professional organisations, who said doctors had an ethical duty to speak out about crisis of care facing their patients. Pillay called a meeting with the 24 heads of the specialist clinical units within the complex, which includes the Dora Nginza, Livingstone and Provincial hospitals, where he outlined the budget constraints facing his department and appealed to doctors to work more efficiently to accommodate more patients. He said that in their minds they had a staff shortage, but the figures did not warrant it, as there were more than 300 doctors for about 1 300 beds. Pillay said the provincial health department faced a R2bn shortfall on its R15,1bn budget for the 2012/13 fiscal year. The personnel budget had a shortage of R800m. He had previously said that his department was staring at a budget deficit of R2,5bn-R3bn, but that it had since April managed to make savings of about R500m. Pillay said the doctors had legitimate concerns, but the way they had raised their issues had been inappropriate. He said cutting services by cancelling elective surgery was "almost the same as a wildcat strike", and the acting CEO of the complex was within her rights to have threatened disciplinary action. A doctor who attended the meeting with Dr Pillay, who asked not to be identified because he was not mandated to speak on behalf of his colleagues, said Dr Pillay needed to tackle the health department's "bloated" administration and appoint more doctors. He said Pillay had unfairly accused doctors of neglecting public sector patients because they ran private practices and that to label doctors doing remunerated work outside the public sector as the cause of the problem was disingenuous. Pillay said doctors at the complex needed to establish a clinical governance committee, which would be given a budget for appointing staff and the autonomy to decide how to allocate them. Separately, Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi said at the South African Medical Association's annual conference that he had received conflicting reports about the staffing crisis in the Eastern Cape, which extended beyond Port Elizabeth and had seen some doctors unpaid since January. He said the issue was less about money than it was about management.