

Strike makes clinics bleed

EASTERN Cape clinics and hospitals are experiencing critical shortages of medicines, while surgery and other procedures have virtually ground to a halt because of a wildcat strike at the Mthatha Health Complex. Officials say more than 100 rural clinics and a number of hospitals have been affected by the strike by administrative staff. Hospitals report that referrals for X-rays, among other things, have virtually stopped. About four million people depend on the affected services and large parts of the affected area fall under the OR Tambo District, a National Health Insurance pilot site. An urgent notice has ordered the hospital's executives to find alternative facilities to refer critically ill patients to and to send others home. It states that only emergency cases will be attended to at the Nelson Mandela Academic and Mthatha hospitals. Nelson Mandela Academic is one of the poorest-performing hospitals in South Africa. It has even been dubbed "the mortuary" by locals, who say there is a great likelihood of people who go there dying. Dr Karl le Roux, who works at Zithulele Hospital, said the strikers were holding the sick and poor at ransom in order to get a pay rise. He said the strike had wreaked havoc on health services in the district. The Mthatha Health Complex depot supplies about a dozen district hospitals and more than 100 rural clinics with essential medical supplies. Since the end of September, the depot has been manned by just one department manager and a pharmacist, who have been processing and dispensing orders for facilities across the province. The recent transport workers' strike also adversely affected the delivery of medicines. Flood damage has compounded the situation, according to health department spokesman Sizwe Kupelo. The notice, which was written by the head of clinical governance at Mthatha Complex, Dr Theodore Madiba, instructed staff to attend only to emergency cases and to discharge or transfer patients who had conditions that were not life-threatening. Clinics were running out of essential medicines such as ARVs and antibiotics, a source confirmed. The source said the repercussions were disastrous: without medicine, patients defaulted on their treatment and that could be life-threatening. Le Roux said the in-theatre X-ray machine at Bedford Orthopaedic Hospital had been broken for weeks and that no administrative staff had been on duty to arrange for its repair. Because of the out-of-service machine, about 50 percent of critical orthopaedic surgeries had not been performed. While some hospitals are making plans to collect medicines from Mthatha, dysfunctional hospitals like Madwaleni, which has only one doctor, are reportedly not receiving any essential supplies. Administrative staff at the Mthatha Complex went on strike because they were excluded from a performance management and development systems bonus. Kupelo said the health department would be taking disciplinary action.