

Border health crisis

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South African healthcare facilities in border towns are being overwhelmed by a large influx of patients from neighbouring countries seeking treatment.

Desperate BaSotho, Zimbabweans, Mozambicans and Swaziland nationals are streaming into South Africa for antenatal care, various surgery procedures, medication, laboratory tests and blood transfusion.

In Limpopo, Musina was the hardest hit while Free State's Bloemfontein sees Lesotho nationals trek in and Manguza which borders Mozambique is sharing its services with their neighbours and Swazi nationals opt for nearby Pongola.

Limpopo health department spokesperson Derrick Kganyago admitted the system was overwhelmed by the influx.

"Our hospitals are already overburdened. We are already struggling as we don't have enough staff. You can just imagine, its a nightmare," Kganyago said.

SA laws prohibit hospitals from turning away patients even when they do not have documentation.

A KZN nurse, who spoke on condition of anonymity, as she is not authorised to speak to the media, said they were battling to keep up with the influx.

"You come across stories of people who say they cannot afford to buy medicines such as ARVs or get a simple vaccine. Even a pint of blood is out of reach for them," she said.

A Zimbabwean doctor said an appendectomy surgery in Harare costs R25000, while it would cost half that amount in South Africa.

"The public healthcare in Zimbabwe has collapsed. The country only has one neurosurgeon in Harare servicing the whole country whereas South Africa has a wide spectrum of specialists. "The unavailability of some medicines like cancer medicines also forces patients to cross into South Africa," the doctor said.

A Lesotho national Kennedy Mohau said Lesotho nationals depended on South Africa's facilities for major procedures.

"My aunt had to be transferred to Bloemfontein in December and we lost her in the process. If our system was working fine she probably would have survived. They failed to do a Laparoscopic

gallbladder surgery in Maseru and she had to be moved to South Africa. So, a lot of Lesotho people end up having to cross the border, which is frustrating,” Mohau said.

KZN has not been spared with Swazi and Mozambican nationals across the border visiting their clinics.

A Beitbridge woman, Memory, said she was left no choice, but to seek medical care in Musina.

“Its cheaper in SA and there are more specialists like gynaecologists,” she said.

Lovemore Chitoro said he regularly enters the country to buy medicine for his arthritis and back pain, adding he also uses the opportunity to buy medicines to sell back home.

“Medicines are cheaper in South Africa, so why not exploit that avenue given the situation back home in Zimbabwe,” he said.

Prof Leslie London at UCT’s public health medicine division believes South Africa can help by strengthening support for the neighbouring countries.

“The health service has been treating Zimbabweans and other migrants for many years and this is all part of the challenge for the NHI,” London said.

By LERATO DIALE