

Admin bungles leave public healthcare patients in the lurch

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FAILURE to sign new contracts before old ones expire is one of the main reasons patients in the public healthcare system are left without medicine. Other factors are an absence of contracts for certain medicines and suppliers' failure to meet contractual agreements, according to a team from the school of public health at the University of the Western Cape. Writing in the South African Medical Journal, team leader Bvudzai Magadzire said the shortcomings uncovered by questioning 70 health workers and managers in the Western Cape posed a critical problem. She said the challenges imposed by stock-outs are becoming more evident against the backdrop of increased demand for chronic disease treatment, but they are not new. Minimising stock-outs, Magadzire said, requires action at a national level, where procurement takes place, to ensure that tenders are awarded timeously and supplier performance is monitored.

Magadzire and her team looked at the availability of five popular medicines between 2012 and 2014, and the health staff they questioned said late tender awards caused problems every two years, when contracts expired. One respondent told the researchers that the National Department of Health know exactly when the tender is going to end but the process takes so long and then they must ask the current tender companies to extend their contract for one or two months. Another respondent said there is a lack of understanding with the tender guys that these pharmaceutical manufacturers sometimes plan two years in advance. Poor communication about medicine requirements is also a problem. A case in point: about 70 items were excluded from the most recent national tender at the time of the study without first consulting provinces. Suppliers often fail to deliver the drugs required. One official told the researchers that the most that can be done is to inform the Department of Health, but history has shown that those suppliers get reappointed and we sit with the same problems again.

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