

Hospitals close in Mpumalanga as doctors and nurses fear for their safety

By [Nelisiwe Msomi](#)

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Three Mpumalanga hospitals are running on skeleton staff and have shut down all outpatient services as workers embark on a stay away to protest a recent spate of attacks on doctors and nurses and unsafe working conditions.



Doctors and nurses were held at gunpoint to stop giving patients treatment. (Paul Botes)

“We are not happy with the way the safety of health workers is being treated in this province. It is not getting the attention it deserves,” says nursing trade union, Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa's provincial secretary Mzwandile Shongwe.

Early Sunday morning, a mob of people from a nearby tavern entered Witbank Hospital in Emalahleni and held doctors and nurses at gunpoint demanding they stop treating victims of a fight at the bar. Hospital security was unable to contain the situation and the police were called in, according to a statement by the province's departments of health and safety, security and liaison.

“We were expected to continue working as if nothing happened,” a health worker who asked for his identity to remain anonymous told Bhekisisa.

After workers began refusing to come to work, the hospital started to discharge patients.

“The hospital is being emptied out,” one worker says.

Similar shutdowns in other Mpumalanga facilities, like Tintswalo Hospital and Amajuba Memorial Hospital, means that about 10% of the province’s hospitals have scaled down services since Monday. This includes allowing patients on chronic medicine, including for HIV to collect their tablets.

Staff say they know who was behind the attack but that no arrests have been made. Workers say requests for more armed security at the health facility have also gone unfulfilled.

“We demand the arrest of this man and his accomplices,” staff wrote in a letter to the MECs for health and safety. “We are not safe until this sort of people are removed from the community we serve.

“We also want to serve with peace.”

Violence in the province’s hospitals is nothing new. Last year, a doctor was stabbed to death in Middelburg Hospital, Shongwe tells Bhekisisa. The latest incident in Mpumalanga comes on the heels of multiple attacks on female doctors within days of each other at Bloemfontein’s Pelonomi hospital, [TimesLIVE reports](#). One doctor was almost raped and the other was robbed at gunpoint. The University of the Free State suspended its training programme for medical students at the facility in the wake of the violence.

Very few of Mpumalanga’s healthcare facilities provide sufficient security for its employees, a [2016/17 report](#) from the health oversight body, the Office of Health Standards Compliance (OHSC) found.

The province scored 28% for the category that looked at staff safety and wellness.

Meanwhile, at Mpumalanga’s Tintswalo and Amajuba Memorial hospitals, workers say that the threat isn’t from attackers, it’s from the very buildings they work in.

In the OHSC report, Tintswalo Hospital scored an overall mark of 52%. The OHSC found that the provincial health facilities it surveyed lacked maintenance plans and that budgets showed that some facilities were skimping on regular upkeep. Recommendations made by safety and hazard inspectors had also not been implemented.

On Wednesday, the MECs of health and safety, security and liaison met with representatives for striking workers but were unable to come to an agreement, says Denosa’s provincial secretary Mzwandile Shongwe.

The nursing union has demanded security upgrades for health facilities, including introducing security cameras, access cards, guards in every ward and personal panic buttons for staff.

It is unclear when services will resume at these facilities as government and employees are at loggerheads in meetings.

“We are not happy with the way the safety of health workers is being treated in this province”, Shongwe says. “It’s not getting the attention it deserves.”