

■ HEALTH

Hospital staff 'were not vaccinated'

Kalafong workers say they are being exposed to disease on a daily basis, and many are falling ill

RUDZANI MATSHILI AND NTANDO MAKHUBU

WHILE it was critical for hospitals to ensure that infectious diseases did not spread among staff, some lacked the resources to put any measures in place.

This has come to light after Expanded Public Works Programme workers at Kalafong Hospital claimed they had contracted various illnesses because they were not vaccinated.

According to general workers, at least 60 who started working for the hospital in February 2018 had been suffering from various ailments. They were employed as cleaners, general workers and kitchen staff, but were never vaccinated, they claimed.

"I clean a ward where people with

different chronic diseases are admitted. The procedure for any worker is that they must be screened to check if they are ill or not. Subsequent to that, they are vaccinated so that their immune system fights infections. But that procedure was never done with any of the workers on the programme," one worker said.

"I now have a lung infection, my back hurts and I have severe headaches. Some people have resigned due to getting ill all the time due to infections."

Senior medical manager at Kalafong Dr Manei Letebele said workers were supplied with personal protective equipment in line with their area of work.

"This is ordered by and made available by the supervisors. It is the responsibility of the immediate supervisor to ensure the availability of the equipment and the responsibility of the employee to request it from the supervisor.

"The Occupational Health and Safety Act requires the employer to provide and maintain, as far as is reasonably practical, an environment that is safe and without risk to employees.

"Our institution does have medical surveillance and provision of personal protective equipment in place. The workers in question were seconded through the Department of Infrastructure Development to work in our institution, and have access to equipment."

President of the Democratic Nursing Organisation of SA (Denosa) Simon Hlungwani said: "In specialised or tertiary institutions like Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital and Steve Biko Academic Hospital, they have better resources or a unit that does all the screenings and vaccinations.

"But you can find that there are other institutions that do not have those resources, which leaves staff exposed to the infections."

DA provincial health spokesperson Jack Bloom said he had referred the matter to the South African Human Rights Commission.

"It seems that they were never vaccinated because they came from the department instead of being employed

directly by the hospital. This oversight has affected their health, leading to frequent work absences."

The World Health Organisation (WHO) as well as the SA Healthcare Association also stresses the importance of infection control, saying prevention is vital to prevent or control the spread of infections in healthcare facilities and the community.

"When a disease agent is unknown, a symptom-based approach will reduce the risk of transmission to the health care worker and to other patients," the Association said.

"It is essential that standard precautions are applied at all times when caring for any patient, regardless of their infectious disease status."