

■ FORENSIC

Shoddy state of labs compromises justice

Staff exposed to dangerous chemicals; lack of ventilation; samples date back to 2005...

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EXPOSED hazardous chemicals and broken fridges at Pretoria Forensic Lab have highlighted the mess plaguing the government's forensic labs, which could be detrimental to the justice system.

An investigation done by the Department of Labour (DoL), the report of which has been with the lab's authorities since October, reveals that the building is unsafe for occupation because of a slew of irregularities, including ventilation systems which are in a shambles. There are three such labs in South Africa, others in Joburg and Cape Town.

The revelations at the Pretoria lab follow The Star reporting last month that the lab in Joburg was recommended for closure by a SizweNtsalubaGobodo

report because it too was shoddy, with samples dating back to 2005 yet to be finalised.

The DoL report, which The Star has seen, found that employees at the lab were regularly exposed to hazardous chemicals without receiving medical assistance.

The report made a number of recommendations for the lab and the Department of Health (DoH) to heed, including that the lab should take steps to ensure the safety of its employees where inhalation of hazardous chemical substance was concerned.

"An employer shall ensure that an employee is under medical surveillance if the exposure to substances hazardous to his or her health is such that an identifiable disease may be related to the exposure," the report read.

However, staff at the Pretoria lab told The Star that none of these recommendations have been implemented, including that the DoH "has totally ignored" the red flags outlined in the report.

"Two weeks ago, the City of Tshwane disconnected the electricity supply to the building due to non-payment. The water supply was also previously disconnected for three weeks due to non-payment," said one employee, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"Our official telephones are not working for the past six months. When we want to call head office we have to use our private cell phones. There is a lack of primary standards and consumables. No medical monitoring for analysts exposed to harmful chemicals and pathogens," the employee added.

Some of the fridges at the lab allegedly don't work, which supposedly causes samples to deteriorate and could compromise criminal cases reliant on forensic analysis.

However, DoH spokesperson Popo Maja said, without elaborating, that most of the issues highlighted by the DoL had been dealt with.

"I am told that the Department of Public Works is attending to the outstanding issues that are the mandate of that department," Maja said.

DoL spokesperson Makhosonke Buthelezi said he was unable to comment fully on the report because the two inspectors who compiled it were away from work.

But Buthelezi said: "I confirm that we will continue with our role of ensuring that buildings, including those hous-

ing government departments, adhere to occupational health and safety regulations."

Forensic expert Wayne Gordon said a chain of custody in a criminal case relying on forensic analysis was critical as it was the foundation upon which a case was built.

"Correct evidence collection is essential because that is where an investigation and a case begin. If evidence is not collected correctly, forensic analysis may either be complicated, impossible, or unreliable. Forensic analysis is important because these analyses and the interpretation thereof, paint a picture of the events relating to the crime. This is how cases are built and if the process is executed correctly, justice should run its course fairly," Gordon said.

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