

■ REPORT

# Pretoria forensic lab an unsafe 'bloody mess'

**KHAYA KOKO**

khaya.koko@inl.co.za

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

An investigation done by the national Department of Labour, the report of which was given to the lab's leadership in October, revealed that the building was unsafe for occupation because of a slew of irregularities, including ventilation systems in a shambles.

The report found that employees at the lab were regularly exposed to hazardous chemicals without receiving medical assistance for the exposure.

The report made a number of recommendations for the laboratory and the national Department of Health to heed, including that the laboratory should take steps to ensure the safety of its employees where the inhalation of hazardous chemical substances was concerned.

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

However, staff at the Pretoria lab said none of these recommendations had been implemented, including that

the Health Department "has totally ignored" 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 an employee who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"Our official telephones haven't been working for the past six months. When we want to call head office we have to use our private cellphones.

"There's a lack of primary standards and consumables. No medical monitoring for analysts exposed to harmful chemicals and pathogens."

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

However, Health Department spokesperson Popo Maja said most of the issues highlighted by their Labour counterparts had been dealt with, without elaborating on which issues he was referring to,

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

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