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THE Undertakers' Forum has threatened to take legal action against the Department of Health in KwaZulu-Natal if they proceed with closing down the Magwaza Maphalala (Gale) Street Mortuary.

During an oversight visit to the mortuary in October by the health committee, it emerged that the mortuary would be shut down because the building was in a poor condition.

Nomakiki Majola, the head of the committee, confirmed that the closure of the facility was in the pipeline.

"We've asked the Department of Health to compile a report on the mortuary, on the intention to close it. The conditions are poor and it's a health hazard. There are rodents in the mortuary and pieces of dead human tissue laying around."

Majola said their intention was to conduct all post-mortems at the Phoenix Mortuary.

"The department will have to consult with all the role-players and look at the issue of labour before the move is done."

Forum threatens legal action if Gale Street morgue closes

Ahmed Paruk, the head of the forum, said the department was dodging the real issue – the payment of overtime and staff shortages.

The forum represented 36 undertakers in KZN.

"Staff have been waiting for more than three years for their overtime to be paid. As a result, they embarked on strike action and go-slows. The ripple effect was that the public suffered due to delays with post-mortems."

Paruk said bodies also began piling up at the mortuary because they were short of 13 staff. However, posts could not be filled due to a lack of funding.

"The department is blaming the infrastructure of the building as a way of diverting attention from the overtime payment. The building is about

30 years old. It can be refurbished and maintained by the Department of Public Works. There's no need to close it."

Paruk added that the staff provided an essential service and the government needed to pay their overtime.

"It's going to cause an influx of post-mortems in Phoenix and even Pinetown.

"In no time we'll be stuck with a backlog just like Gale Street. If the closure goes ahead, the forum will go to the Durban High Court to apply for an interdict to prevent the department from proceeding with the closure."

The staff at the mortuary, who wished to remain anonymous, said they were against the closure.

A forensic pathologist said his overtime since 2016 was R350 000.

"The department can't close this building down.

"They need to invest in fixing it and find a way to pay staff.

"We conduct 12 to 15 post-mortems a day and each takes an average of two hours."

He added that other mortuaries would not be able to handle the increased work load.

Another staff member said she was told they would be redeployed.

"All we're hearing is that we're going to be moved and the mortuary closed down. There's still no word on our overtime payment. None of us want to move."

Halalisani Gumede, the general secretary of Public Allied Workers Union of South Africa, said the closure was an easy way out for the department.

"The building is not in a dilapidated condition or unusable. There are minor things like doors, air conditioners and handles on fridges that need to be fixed. The department has lacked in maintaining the building."

Gumede said the mortuary was the biggest in KZN.

"On a weekly basis, 70 post-mortems are done in Gale Street and 30 are done a week in Phoenix. The staff there will not be able to handle the influx.

"The staff at Gale Street are standing in solidarity with each other for their overtime pay.

"This is just a way for the department to divide them."

The Department of Health did not comment by the time of publication.