

Gauteng Health denies safety failures in Charlotte Maxeke's R40m fire

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Gauteng Health denies safety failures in Charlotte Maxeke's R40m fire April 21st, 2021 SA Provincial Health Organisation: Position: Deadline Date: Location: Johannesburg's Charlotte Maxeke Academic Hospital and its fire hydrants were operationally compliant, says Gauteng Health, among claims that the latest fire is part of a pattern of fire outbreaks at public hospitals suffering from maintenance neglect. Health Minister Dr Zweli Mkhize said during a site visit to the hospital that an estimated R40-million in hospital supplies, mostly personal protective equipment (PPE), were lost during the blaze. He was joined by Gauteng premier David Makhura and provincial health MEC Nomathemba Mokgethi. Makhura said the hospital would remain closed for a week. Patients who needed medication and care were advised to go to nearby hospitals. Mkhize said the fire had caused significant destruction. He said the fire had started on the dispensary side of the facility. "We have seen in some areas there has been destruction with the floors caving in. Holes have appeared on different floors. It was a huge fire resulting in a huge amount of destruction," said Mkhize. No patients were injured. TimesLIVE reports that Gauteng Health Department spokesperson Kwara Kekana said safety officers for the department of infrastructure development conduct inspections twice a year at hospitals. She said an inspection at Charlotte Maxeke Hospital was done in October/November last year and there were "no findings". "This means that the hydrants were all in good condition and functional," she said. It was earlier reported that the hospital had no working fire hydrants. The Sunday Times reports that this was according to Wynand Engelbrecht, the CEO of Fire Ops SA, a private company that took part in the fire-fighting operation. The fire broke out at 11.30am on Friday, and at 9.30pm the health department said it had "reignited". But Engelbrecht disputed this. "There is no such thing. The reason the fire couldn't be controlled continuously is because the fire hydrants on the premises are out of commission. They are not working because of a lack of maintenance," he is quoted in the Sunday Times as saying. Engelbrecht said he would write to the ministers of Health, Co-operative Governance and Public Works to call for a "complete revamp" of the hospital's fire protection system. "As it stands, the building is a death trap," he said after premier David Makhura said yesterday the hospital would remain closed for a week. Scores of patients had to be evacuated as firefighters from across Gauteng battled the blaze, reports News24. The fire first broke out at the hospital's special dispensary stores on Friday morning. The provincial health department said in a statement on Friday morning that the fire had been contained. But another statement followed at around 20H00 and it stated that the fire reignited. Patients were moved to other wards as firefighters battled the blaze. Medical supplies, including personal protective equipment (PPE), syringes and masks, were believed to have been destroyed. A healthcare worker who asked to remain anonymous, said the fire started on the second floor where the equipment was stored. "The raging fire destroyed their equipment," she said. Daily Maverick writes that the response to the fire and the hospital's alleged lack of preparedness has raised further questions about the province's ability to maintain its infrastructure and the city's ability to respond to emergencies. In a statement, the National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union said, "The fact that the fire raged on for many hours proves that occupational safety measures are not adequately adhered to at the hospital. "Workers go to work to sell their labour-power, not to sell their lives." The Public Servants Association warned the provincial government to "not gamble with the lives by resuming hospital business without a health and safety clearance certificate". The Democratic Alliance's Jack Bloom said, "The devastating fire at the Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Hospital is the fourth hospital fire in Gauteng in six years, and past inspections of Gauteng public hospitals have revealed widespread lack of compliance with the Occupational Health and Safety Act." He continued: "Previous fires took place at Carletonville

Hospital in February this year, at Bheki Mlangeni Hospital in May 2019, and Tambo Memorial Hospital in May 2015. Another fire started at the head office of the Gauteng Health Department in the Bank of Lisbon building in September 2018.” In 2017, the Department of Labour inspected seven Gauteng hospitals for biohazard and other safety issues. Each one failed to meet the required safety standards. Charlotte Maxeke was not one of the seven inspected facilities.