

# Hospital of horrors: Eastern Cape nurses struggle amid claims of no soap, lack of medical supplies

Candice Bezuidenhout

06:22



Livingstone Hospital in Gqeberha. (Candice Bezuidenhout/News24)

- **There is a lack of medical supplies at a major hospital in the Eastern Cape, according to the Public Servants Association.**
  - **The PSA and nursing union Denosa claim there is a lack of needles, syringes, and soap at Livingstone Hospital in Gqeberha.**
  - **The Department of Health says there is available stock at the hospital.**
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A "critical" shortage of syringes and needles, no soap for patients to wash themselves, and hospital managers scrambling to procure medical supplies from other hospitals.

These are only some of the allegations of mismanagement made against the Eastern Cape health department for allegedly failing to provide enough medical supplies to a major hospital in the province, thereby limiting medical personnel's ability to save lives, draw blood and administer medication.

According to the Public Servants Association (PSA), there was a "critical" shortage of syringes and needles at Livingstone Hospital in Gqeberha, arguably the metro's busiest public medical facility.

In a statement, the PSA said this "non-availability" of syringes was "extremely concerning", and medical personnel could not do their jobs properly as a result.

"Communities are at severe risk because they are not receiving proper healthcare and healthcare workers can't properly fulfil their duties owing to the employer's failure to provide critical equipment," it added.

To make matters worse, the Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (Denosa) said its nurses at Livingstone Hospital, who were on the ground and "know what is really going on", struggled to help patients

Denosa claimed the hospital sometimes did not even have enough medication for its patients.

Furthermore, it said, a lack of soap for patients to wash themselves went against everything the department's infectious disease prevention and control measures stood for.

According to Veli Sinqana, a provincial Denosa spokesperson, the lack of soap at a hospital spoke volumes about the facility's lack of quality assurance.

"Having no soap is against the department's infectious disease control and measures, which needs to be addressed urgently.

"Besides Mpox doing the rounds, we also have other infectious diseases. As much as soap is a basic need, it is essential because it is a detergent," Sinqana said.

The PSA added hospital managers had to run to and fro between other hospitals in desperate attempts to get more needles, but these facilities were also at risk of running out of supplies.

According to it, other shortages included nappies, nebuliser masks, adult oxygen masks, oxygen regulators, special plasters, ECG electrodes and ECG paper.

"The PSA believes the primary reason for this dire situation is maladministration by the Department of Health, stemming from the non-payment of service providers."

The department hit back at these allegations, saying when Deputy Director-General Mtandeki Xamlashe visited this hospital on Tuesday, the facility was "managing very well".

Department spokesperson Siyanda Manana said Xamlashe was scheduled to do an oversight inspection at the depot on Wednesday to check stock levels.

"We do have surgical consumables at Livingstone Hospital and we are managing very well," Manana added.

Speaking to News24 on Wednesday, Xamlashe said the hospital staff convinced him the supplies were available and everyone continued with their work during his visit.

He also checked the medical depot, and there was stock for the hospitals.

"If the depot was having problems, all the hospitals serviced from that depot would have problems, not just Livingstone."

When asked if the stock was enough, Xamlashe replied: "That is the million-dollar question. There is never a time when you have enough.

"You always say you have safe supplies rather than enough because you never know which disaster might strike the next day and deplete your resources."

He said the department worked with a stock visibility system, which allowed it to regulate stock at medical facilities across the province.

"If you overstock, you run the risk of stock expiring before it gets used, so you can never fill up your warehouse and say you have enough. You always keep your supplies at a safe level."

However, Denosa rubbished the department's claims of a well-functioning hospital, saying people on the ground - its nurses - had a true perspective of the hospital's situation.

According to the organisation, it had come to its attention apart from the alleged lack of medical supplies and soap, the hospital sometimes did not have enough medication for patients either, affecting their health and routines.

When asked to respond to the department's claims that all is well at the hospital, Sinqana said while things might seem to be going smoothly for those in "higher offices", the nurses struggled on the ground daily.

"That is not a true reflection of what is happening at Livingstone. Even if they say there are supplies, they must ask themselves if it is enough, and if it's not, they need to have plans to address the shortage," he added.

"The issue is that even if there is stock, it is insufficient. Our nurses are struggling, and this affects the patients, too."

Manana provided a list of medical supplies they currently have in stock.

These are:

- Black and green needles.
- Syringes (2ml).
- Tegaderm medical dressings.
- Blades.
- Plaster of Paris bandages.
- ECG electrodes.

The department could not say how much of these supplies are in stock.