

'My hours-long horror with corpse'

Outrage as hospital fails to remove body from ward

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PATIENTS at False Bay Hospital have relived a harrowing ordeal where they were forced to eat and sleep next to a corpse which had been left in a shared ward for hours.

One of the patients Kim Sanderson, a quadriplegic, said she and several other patients were left in a ward with the body of a 92-year-old woman who had died after struggling to breathe.

The distressing event caused outrage over the hospital's handling of the situation and raised concerns about its broader healthcare standards.

Sanderson, who was admitted for gallstone issues, described her stay as dismal, saying she endured sub-standard care. As a wheelchair-bound patient, Sanderson said she struggled with minimal assistance, but the most shocking part of her experience occurred on Monday when they were left sharing a ward with a corpse.

The elderly woman, who had been battling to breathe since Friday, died on Monday morning.

"The nurse came in, then rushed out, calling for a doctor, and threw a blanket over her head," Sanderson recalled.

"Her body was moved to a corner of the room, and the curtains were not drawn all the way closed.

"I could see her grey hair and the blanket over her face, the corpse was left there, just a few feet away from us."

At one point, food was served, and patients were forced to eat their lunch with the body still present.

"We were just left there, eating with a dead body in the room. It was completely inappropriate. Nobody came to remove the body. It was horrific."

When Sanderson inquired about why the body had not been removed, she was allegedly told by hospital staff

that the hospital was too full and there was nowhere else to place the body.

"First they told me that she wasn't dead, then they told me the hospital was overcrowded and that they didn't have anywhere to put her. I couldn't believe it. It felt like they had just forgotten about the situation," Sanderson said.

In response to the allegations, Natalie Watlington, a spokesperson for the provincial health department, said False Bay Hospital does not have an onsite mortuary to store deceased patients until undertakers collect the bodies.

She explained that the hospital uses the services of contracted service providers who are contacted as soon as the family is informed about a death.

"Family members of the deceased are allowed to use their own undertakers, who then arrange for the collection of the body," Watlington said.

"Collection takes place on the same day once the undertaker has been contacted."

Watlington confirmed that, on the day in question, the hospital was at full capacity and the ward designated for the deceased body had been made available to care for patients.

"We can confirm that the deceased remained, temporarily, in the seven-bed ward Ms Sanderson described. The deceased was declared dead by the medical officer at 11:00, and the service provider collected the deceased on the same day," she said.

"The curtains were drawn around the bed to try and avoid further discomfort to other patients in the ward while we waited for the contracted service provider."

Watlington also addressed concerns regarding hospital staff, stating that clinicians use their cell phones for medical applications, which are necessary for patient referrals to ter-

tary hospitals and for efficient medical management. She emphasised that the clinicians are required to be on call in case of an emergency and must be contactable when on duty.

Watlington thanked Sanderson for raising her concerns and assured that all patient feedback is taken seriously.

"We are committed to listening and improving our services. If any patient wishes to share feedback, we encourage them to use the channels provided for communication," she said.

The Health and Other Service Personnel Trade Union of South Africa (Hospersa) has highlighted a forensic crisis in the Western Cape, affecting not only patients and community members but also health sector staff.

"Nurses at clinics are unable to end their shifts when a patient dies, as there is often a delay in collecting the deceased's body. The service is ineffective, with significant backlogs in autopsies as well."

"We again urge the Department of Health in the Western Cape, to give special attention to forensic services and address the various challenges within."

Dr Aslam Dasoo from the Progressive Health Forum stated that while the situation should not have occurred, it is something that can happen under certain circumstances.

"Three to four hours may not seem unusual in such circumstances, but it must understandably be distressing for other patients in the ward."

"These things can be difficult, and we sometimes see similar scenarios, such as on a flight when someone passes away. It really depends on the available resources."

"If there's no space elsewhere, the body may have to be temporarily placed in the ward, we've had instances in the country where bodies were left for up to eight or nine hours."