

● Desperate situation with phones down, security guards on strike and escaped mental patients

Livingstone on a knife-edge

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Tensions were running high at Livingstone Hospital yesterday as staff grappled with challenges including out-of-service phones, security guards not being on duty and the escape of three mentally ill patients.

With the landlines down and guards not at their posts due to nonpayment of bills by the Eastern Cape health department, a protest was staged by security personnel about salary grievances.

While the protest was happening, a psychiatric patient knocked out a window in his ward and three patients escaped through the gap.

A Livingstone doctor, who asked not to be named, said the situation was serious.

"We have to take care of mentally ill patients in the overflow ward, normally 10 at a time, until there is room at Provincial Hospital's psychiatric ward," the doctor said.

"Most of them are dangerous. Normally we rely on security to guard them and keep everyone safe but the guards are on strike because they have not been paid.

"Now at least three of these patients have escaped through this broken window and they are wandering around the property. It is a very difficult situation."

In another troubling incident, a family from Nqweba (previously Kirkwood) recently had to wait for nearly five

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hours to hear that their loved one had died at the facility.

The delay in relaying the message to them was a result of the phone lines having been suspended as the provincial health department had not paid its Telkom bill.

The department owes Telkom a total of more than R67m for facilities throughout the province.

Marie-Elize Wolmarans said her husband, Conrad, 53, had been admitted with a stomach ulcer and had undergone a third operation three weeks ago.

"We had been unhappy about the hygiene and not being able to get information from the nurses and doctors as to what was going on," she said.

"But on the Friday he was talking more to us so we were happy."

"Then on the Sunday March 16, I got a phone call at 7.04am from a nurse who said my husband had died at 2.10am."

"She said she was sorry they

hadn't called earlier but they had no air time.

"We had to get there before 8am because then his body would be taken to the morgue and we wouldn't be able to see him until Monday."

"I couldn't get there in time so we had to wait until then."

National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union regional secretary Samkelo Msila said Livingstone's phone lines had been down since the beginning of January.

"They are still down because management has not paid its Telkom bill," Msila said.

"It is a very big issue. For some outgoing communication, they use contract cell-phones or emails."

"But people from poor communities need to be able to phone in their emergencies to a landline and that does not exist, so it is very serious."

Msila said a worrying situation regarding safety was also unfolding at the hospital, which made use of Nomgwenya Security.

"None of the 78 security guards are at their posts at the hospital today because they have not been paid."

The manager of Nomgwenya at the company's Durban headquarters was not immediately available for comment, so a message was left with the receptionist.

However, no response had been received by the time of publication.

Health & Other Services

REPORT CONTINUES: P2

Livingstone on a knife-edge

REPORT FROM: P1

Personnel Trade Union of South Africa (Hospersa) provincial secretary Dorothy Ndhlovu bemoaned the fact that the telephone lines had not been working.

"It has indeed been a challenge," Ndhlovu said.

"Employees are using their own cellphones to enable connection between the facility and the outside world and in some instances they run out of airtime as there is no reimbursement being facilitated.

"Even if there are any emergencies that arise where there is a need to enable communication with patients' families, that cannot take place unless there is somebody who has a cellphone with airtime on that particular shift.

"Therefore communication between the facility and the outside world is delayed."

She also weighed in on the security situation.

"We can confirm that guards have stopped their services today [yesterday] due to nonpayment of their salaries, which were due on March 20, and to date they have not received any update.

"We have tried to meet Livingstone Hospital acting chief executive officer Thembisa Notshe, and she refused to engage with us.

"We will have a meeting with our members on night shift tonight to sensitise them on the issue.

"This will be followed by a

meeting with the day staff tomorrow [Wednesday] morning."

In a security incident a fortnight ago, in the early hours of March 16, three masked men confronted three guards in the Livingstone Hospital guardhouse at gunpoint and robbed them of their cellphones.

Livingstone serves more than 2.5-million people in the Eastern Cape and is also the only hospital that caters for certain specialist procedures in the province.

Eastern Cape health spokesperson Siyanda Manana said yesterday the department was aware of the phone line issue and was dealing with it.

"Suspension only happened on March 11," Manana said.

"The total owed to Telkom for all Eastern Cape health department facilities in the province is R67,337,991.96.

"It's the new financial year and the department is prioritising the debt."

On the security situation and apparent nonpayment of Nomgwenya, he said the provincial health department normally took stock of all invoices a month before the new financial year.

"When the new financial year kicks in, we prioritise all our suppliers that we owe.

"The security company will be paid."

Manana did not respond to subsequent questions about the escape of the psychiatric patients.