

# Lives at risk as Murchison Hospital in KwaZulu-Natal continues to operate

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Murchison Hospital in KwaZulu-Natal's Ugu district continues to operate in breach of a national health protocol under conditions made hazardous to patients and medical personnel by a chronic water crisis, according to sources at the hospital.



Photo: MGH Institute of Health Professions

The water crisis, which began four years ago, has rendered the hospital inoperable for much of the time, although it has stayed open. Piped municipal water to the hospital has been available for about half the time over the period.

The crisis has affected the entire Ugu district, at times leaving the population of about 1-million people without piped water for weeks on end.

Doctors say the conditions at the hospital, which is intended to serve about 250,000 people, are likely to cause cross-infections between patients, with medical staff as intermediary vectors.

Staff cannot wash their hands before and after treating patients, while toilets have become permanently blocked. Used toilet paper is deposited in dry bins.

Staff fetch buckets of water from an intermittently supplied tank to flush toilets, but even this system has become unworkable and is being worsened in the summer heat.

In one instance in which a Murchison doctor went on record, she said she contracted infectious hepatitis from a child who had died later.

Another Murchison doctor said that while it would be extremely difficult to directly trace infections, the epidemiological correlation with handwashing was obvious. At hospitals such as Murchison, where about 80% of patients were immune compromised due to HIV, the danger was acute.

Water and health experts have warned that the situation at Murchison is another Life Esidimeni waiting to happen.

In response to an earlier supply interruption, KwaZulu-Natal health department spokeswoman Ncumisa Mafunda said water supply problems were not unique to the province but were a national crisis.

"At a local government level, water supply is a competency of a district municipality not the department. However, the department can confirm that one of its facilities encountered challenges of water supply on March 2 as a result of a strike by district municipality staff. The hospital contingency measures then kicked in to supply water from the borehole and the three Jojo tanks that are placed in strategic areas. The water supply was restored on March 3 and by Sunday all departments in the hospital had water supply.

"The department would like to emphasise that service delivery was not compromised and the hospital functioned at its full capacity. The hospital continues to render services to patients as normal," said Mafunda.

The water supply had been interrupted twice since that inquiry and no new response had been received.

A national Health Department spokesman has confirmed that a protocol existed in terms of which an inoperable hospital must be closed and patients referred to other facilities.

This has not been the practice at Murchison Hospital.

The spokesman could not provide any more detail due to a high volume of inquiries related to the listeria outbreak, he said. Subsequent inquiries have not yet been answered.

Department of Water and Sanitation spokesman Sputnik Ratau said that while reticulation was a municipal competency, a response from his department was indicated, though he had not been able to do so at the time of writing.

The conditions at the hospital have been brought to the attention of the Ugu Municipality and the provincial and national health departments over a period of months, yet Business Day's inquiries have been largely fruitless.

The municipality has not responded to inquiries, while the hospital has referred the matter to its provincial head office, which, in turn, has referred the inquiries back to the hospital.

**Source:** *Business Day*