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A Kerry Cullinan

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Author



voice of

"On a busy night in casualty, we can see 300 patients," he adds. "All these patients will have to be seen by two professional nurses, two staff nurses, two nursing assistants and two or three doctors."

"The shortage of staff makes everything bad. This is the cause of all the problems of working conditions of nurses."

Cele says that on such nights, "You just hope that none of the staff are off sick because then it becomes very difficult".

There is a high absenteeism rate because of stress or exhaustion, sometimes caused because many nurses are also moonlighting at private hospitals to earn more money.

He works an 11-hour day, either from 7am to 6pm or, if on night shift, from 6pm to 7am.

"We don't get paid for overtime but are supposed to get time off. But taking time off is often difficult because of the staff shortages," says Cele.

Cele has two years training and seven years experience, and takes home R2 700 a month.

a Nurse

Staff Nurse Sibonelo Cele

of Mahatma Gandhi Hospital, north of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal

"The nursing colleges have doubled their enrolment. But this is not the solution because nurses still want more money, so they will keep on leaving."

"A lot of nurses are leaving, really a lot. But I only know of one who ever came back," says Cele, who is also a shop steward for the Democratic Nurses Organisation of SA (DENOSA).

Cele is currently working in the male medical ward which is supposed to have 35 patients, but almost always has around 40.

"If I am busy with one patient on the one side, it is not possible to see what is happening with patients on the other side of the ward."

Nurses prioritise the very sick, and these are often AIDS patients who take much of the nurses' time.

"Most of the people with AIDS symptoms have sores in their throat so it is hard for them to take their medicine. You might have to crush five TB tablets for a patient only to have them vomit it up again. So then you must crush more. This takes time, so instead of taking an hour to give 35 patients their medication in a ward, it can take three hours."

Cele is dedicated to his profession, but says that nurses "make a lot of sacrifices" while doing their job.

"At night, nurses sometimes have about 15 patients each to take care of. This means that some of the patients will be neglected."