

# Nurses picket over staff shortages at False Bay Hospital

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About 25 healthcare workers from False Bay Hospital, mostly nurses, protested on Friday for better personal protective equipment (PPE) and more staff.



Nomzamo Mngupane has been a nurse for six years. She said there have been staff shortages since 2018 and it has got worse since the Covid-19 pandemic. Photo: Ashraf Hendricks

Carrying placards and singing protest songs, they marched from the hospital to Main Road where they held a picket during their lunch break. Vehicles hooted in support as the protesters held up signs stating: "Employer, we need full PPEs please", "Protect us so we protect patients", and "The workload is killing us".

"We are asking the Department [of Health] to supply this hospital with full PPE," said Songezo Nompunga, a shop steward and nurse at the trauma ward. He said this must include a mask, face visor, gloves, boots, overalls and a plastic apron. He said sometimes nurses only have surgical masks and gloves.

Nompunga said they have been short-staffed since 2018, and since the Covid-19 pandemic things were getting worse. He said discussions with management and officials have made no difference. He said many nurses were sourced through agencies, but they have now chosen to work at the new centres for Covid-19, where they get contracts or better salaries. Nompunga said that staff are working overtime and shifts sometimes run over 12 hours.

Nomzamo Mngupane, a nurse for six years, said staff shortages were also made worse because some of the nurses are under quarantine (because they possibly have Covid-19). She said that some staff missed lunch to look after patients.

## PPE shortage

Mngupane is stationed at the outside testing centre where everyone entering the hospital is screened. She said that she gets one mask per week and works wearing that mask with scrubs.

Nolubabalo Mbata, a nurse working in the Covid ward, said they have been given scrubs, gowns, gloves and sometimes face shields, but they needed boots and plastic aprons.

She said that staff are expected to wash their own gowns after use at home. "They want me to use my washing machine that I'm using with my family," she said. She is worried that she might take the virus home. Mbata has three children and a husband.

Mbata said that the shortage of staff is affecting the quality of care. On Friday she said she was the only assistant nurse in the ward and had to look after 14 patients. Before Covid-19, it was half that number.

Natalie Watlington, spokesperson for the Southern Region of the Western Cape Department of Health, said the hospital is "currently experiencing more than double the workload they have seen over the past five years".

She said the vacancy rate at the hospital was 7% and that although there are challenges filling the nursing posts, a network of agencies are assisting them. She said that 15 staff members have tested positive.

"We understand that this is stressful for our nurses who are also working extra overtime and courageously caring for patients in spite of the risk to themselves and their families," she said.

Watlington said that the recommended PPE is available for each area and that the stock level is sufficient.

Nompunga said that they are giving the Department 14 days to address them. If nothing happens, they will apply to strike and "down tools".

The protest was supported by Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (Denosa).

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