

The chaos at Bara to be documented

14 January 2009
Kingdom Mabuza

Horrors in biggest hospital

They are sickening scenes. Critical patients dying and others being turned away from the trauma unit because of a lack of space. This is the Chris Hani-Baragwanath Hospital.

In an eight-part documentary series, Al Jazeera news network is this week showing the world how ailing our health system is.

Titled Saving Soweto, the documentary will be shown throughout the world 10 times a day on DStv in the coming weeks.

Patients are captured queuing for 22 hours to be attended to at the X-ray rooms. Overworked doctors and nurses turn away paramedics who bring in more critical patients. A critical patient with a gunshot wound collapses in the queue after waiting for hours to be attended to.

Because of staff shortages patients are forced to find their way to the X-ray rooms. Those who cannot walk because of their injuries push themselves in wheel chairs and wait for hours for their turn to be attended.

A paramedic is shown pleading with doctors to admit a critical patient whom he had nowhere else to take "because other hospitals around are closed", but is turned away because the trauma unit is brimming with patients.

An acute shortage of beds in the maternity ward forces pregnant women in labour to wait on chairs. After giving birth there is no time to heal. Ready or not, a mother has to make way for another patient.

The Gauteng health department says there is nothing wrong with what is in the documentary.

"It is standard procedure even at private hospitals to redirect patients to other facilities if there is no space," says department spokesman Phumelele Kaunda.

She says the department does not view the documentary as an "initiative to discredit the hospital".

"The footage shown in the documentary is a true reflection of what happens in any trauma unit during busy days," Kaunda says.

She says the shortage of health workers is a global problem.

In the first episode the crew interviews Irish volunteer doctor Patrick MacGoey and local doctor Kaajal Pharboo of the trauma unit.

The crew follows them on their 24-hour shift as they attend to about 2000 patients.

Al Jazeera bureau chief in South Africa, Thembisa Fakude, says the documentary depicts the wrongs of the past and challenges faced by the present government.

"The failures of the apartheid government are challenges for the present democratic government," says Fakude.

It took producers Shareen Anderson and Lisa Henry eight weeks to record the series in May last year.

"It was a highly emotional journey. We show conditions under which doctors and nurses save the lives of people of Soweto. We had no agenda," says Henry.



CHAOS : Patients at Soweto's Chris Hani-Baragwanath Hospital queue for hours on end to be helped by medical staff. Above is one of the scenes that will be shown on the Al Jazeera documentary, which will be aired on DStv in the next eight weeks. PHOTO: LUCKY NXUMALO

