



Medics get cop escorts

Move after another attack on nurses

KWAZULU-NATAL Department of Health staff will now be escorted by police when attending to people in communities in parts of Zululand. This comes after three nurses were hijacked, robbed and eventually abandoned in deep bush in the Ntambanana area, near Empangeni.

A hijacker asked one of the frightened nurses if she would have sex with him and she told the man she was HIV positive. It was the 18th hijacking of a department vehicle in the uThungulu District, which encompasses Richards Bay and Empangeni.

Police spokeswoman, Captain Nqobile Gwala, said the incident happened at about 4pm. The nurses, based at Ngwlezane Hospital, had been returning from an outreach programme in the Bhiliya area in a state Citroen Kombi when they were overtaken by a maroon Toyota sedan, the department said.

It blocked the road and three armed men jumped out demanding valuables. The nurses were robbed of cellphones, bank cards and jewellery. "The nurses were then pushed into the middle seat of the Kombi and told to close their eyes. The Kombi was then driven into bush by two of their assailants while the other was following in the Toyota.

"Deep into the bush the hijackers were joined by two other gang members who assisted in offloading and throwing away all the hospital equipment including blood pressure machines, glucometers, patient

registers and medication," said the department.

Health MEC Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo expressed disgust at the hijacking.

The nurses told him they were left in the bush with two assailants while the other drove off in the Kombi.

"Later on they were pushed deep into the bush and left on their own. They then walked until they saw some houses where they summoned help," the department said.

Dhlomo met the nurses, who were fortunately unharmed, and apologised for what had happened to them as they were going about their work.

Counselled

He encouraged them to take some time off and arranged for them to be counselled.

"The safety of health workers comes first. On learning of this horrific act I rushed to uThungulu District toying with the idea of closing down all the outreach programmes.

"This latest incident marks a total of 18 of our vehicles hijacked in that area since April 3 this year.

"Our health professionals are really concerned and afraid and if we stop going to that area, our people are going to start dying," said Dhlomo.

While the police, community leaders and the MEC for Community Safety and Liaison, Mxolisi Kaunda, worked on finding a permanent solution, the police in the area had offered escorts as an interim solution.

Gwala said a case of car hijacking was being investigated

and no arrests had yet been made.

The safety of nurses and other health workers has been in the spotlight for some time.

A nurse at a hospital in Mabopane, in Gauteng, was viciously assaulted in May by a relative of a patient who had just died. The nurse had been throttled, and had her head bashed against the wall.

In January a paediatric nurse at a children's home near Camperdown suffered a fractured skull when she was bludgeoned with a gun following an attack by three robbers.

In May last year a patient, believed to be suffering from psychosis, assaulted six nurses in a medical ward at Northdale Hospital in Pietermaritzburg.

A nurse was also assaulted at Durban's King Edward VIII Hospital last month during violence linked to the outsourcing strike at public hospitals.

There have also been a number of attacks on paramedics in recent months, including two who were robbed at gunpoint in Cape Town last week.

Nurses union, Denosa, had not responded to a request for comment at the time of publication, but in May a spokesman said their members feared being attacked and had threatened to derail the public health system if incidents continued.

"The lack of security leads to countless attacks and if there is no urgent improvement we will withdraw nurses from facilities under threat," said spokesman Sibongiseni Delihlazo. – Daily News Reporter