



Hijackings and violence: health-care workers live in fear

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WHEN an SOS comes in, healthcare workers focus on getting to their patients as fast as they can to help them. But now they're having to focus on their own lives.

The Democratic Nursing Organisation of South Africa (Denosa) KZN provincial secretary, Cassim Lekhoathi, said in the past two months more than 11 vehicles had been hijacked in the Empangeni area in Zululand and more than 18 province-wide.

Themba Mkhwanazi, an outreach nurse from Empangeni, was one such victim.

"I thought they were going to shoot. I co-operated and now I fear for my life," Mkhwanazi said. The incident was over in under a minute but will remain with him for a lifetime.

Mkhwanazi said last month he had been driving a state Toyota Hilux on the R34 near Empangeni when five armed men forced him to stop.

The men wore balaclavas and three pointed AK-47s at him, while two pointed pistols at his colleague.

"We got out of the car, and they drove off with both cars," he said.

"The incident was quick, but the extent of trauma is horrific.

"Even when I drive my private car I am scared. I live in fear because the

hijackers know my face. I worry that if police close in on them, they could easily kill me because I can identify them," he said.

Mkhwanazi still travels as an outreach nurse and although he loves his job, he is worried that others will be attacked.

"It's going to get harder to render services because we are scared," said Mkhwanazi.

"It would help to hear the police had arrested some of these hijackers, perhaps that would discourage would-be hijackers. We also need to know how the department intends safeguarding our lives," he said.

Although the hijackings have gar-

nered attention, Lekhoathi said there were other urgent safety matters.

He said nurses who worked night shifts at clinics at weekends also faced risk.

"There are cases where intoxicated people coming in with injuries wanting to jump the queue. When they are called to order they turn violent," Lekhoathi said.

Denosa previously asked the department to provide security guards with firearms. Instead they were given security guards with batons.

The union has now threatened to withdraw members whose lives are in danger. A meeting with the MEC is scheduled for September 7.