

Just three state oncologists in KZN

Se-Anne Rall

ONCOLOGISTS and radiotherapists from the private sector will provide oncology services at public health facilities while the Department of Health is recruiting replacements to treat cancer patients.

This is according to department spokesperson Sam Mkhwanazi, who responded to questions about the exodus of oncologists from state-owned medical facilities to private practice. There are only two oncologists left at Grey's Hospital in Pietermaritzburg and none in Durban.

Last week, the last oncologist based at Inkosi Albert Luthuli Central Hospital resigned. This hospital sees, on average, at least 80% of the province's cancer patients.

"The head of the clinical unit at Grey's Hospital's oncology unit will oversee the management of patients at this hospital, as well as at Inkosi Albert Luthuli Central Hospital.

In addition to this, other private oncologists and radiotherapists from the Hope-lands Oncology Clinic will assist with planning. The department has already advertised posts to fill vacancies," he said.

The Cancer Association of South Africa (Cansa) will be hardest hit by the shortage. The association, which offers emotional support and accommodation for cancer patients, relies heavily on oncologists to administer their medication.



CARE COLLAPSE: With just a few oncologists left at state hospitals in KZN, private care now seems the only option for cancer patients. PICTURE: MINDENI VILAKAZI

Dr Melissa Wallace, Cansa's head of research and advocacy, said that along with Cancer Alliance and the Medical Rights Advocacy Network, they were engaging with the Department of Health to assist in finding solutions to the ongoing problem.

"We are aware of significant challenges around cancer treatment in the province and other areas nationally, including the lack of functioning radiotherapy equipment and a dearth of oncologists in the

public sector in this province," said Wallace.

"These failures are resulting in poorer prognoses and, in some cases, death for patients awaiting treatment."

According to Noel Desfontaines, the Health and Other Service Personnel Trade Union of South Africa general secretary, hordes of doctors are leaving because of poor working conditions, critical staff shortages and machines not being adequately maintained.