Auditor General flags EC Health: Poor performance is costing lives

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The EC Health Department is in crisis, and based on the latest Auditor General's report, there is still no political will to fix it.

The report for the 2022-23 financial year, presented to the Health Portfolio Committee, brings into stark view a department in deep, deep trouble. The AG found that the department's poor financial performance was, among others, contributing to the deaths of pregnant women and children within health facilities.

This Department's poor performance is killing our citizens!

I shall once again write to the Minister of Health, Dr Joe Paahla, to urge him to place this Department under administration in terms of Section 100 (1) (b) (i) of the Constitution until such time as the minimum standards for health service delivery can once again be met.

He only needs to read the Auditor General's report to understand that this is the only recourse.

Most concerning is the Department's inability to manage records in healthcare facilities due to internal control deficiencies. It has no way of measuring the contingent liability against it, which has arisen from medico-legal claims, as no records exist to establish such.

It is unconscionable that Health can still not produce or store patient records electronically. Tens of thousands of patient files lie in facilities across the province, many of which are not secured effectively. Patient files go missing regularly, some of which land up in the hands of unscrupulous lawyers who then institute fraudulent medico-legal claims against the Department.

The Auditor General has stated that the Department's failure to provide reliable information for actual performance was so severe that 60% of all material indicators were considered unreliable.

Findings on service delivery performance against targets proved just as damning. Programme 2, District Health Services, for example, spent 100% of its budget but achieved just 56% of its targets. Targets that were not met include neonatal deaths and severe acute malnutrition rates in children under five years old.

In Programme 4, Provincial Hospital Services, just 42% of targets were met, while spending was at 102%. One of the targets not met was maternity mortalities in facilities.

Regarding compliance findings, Programme 8, the infrastructure programme, has clearly gone rogue and failed to comply with several tender and procurement requirements in terms of Treasury regulations.

By far the most serious indictment on the Eastern Cape Department of Health is that there is no evidence whatsoever that it has taken any disciplinary steps against officials who have caused fruitless and wasteful expenditure.

There is no evidence whatsoever of any investigations into financial misconduct committed by departmental officials.

The consequences of this failure to hold officials to account are clear: A year-on-year increase in unauthorised expenditure, which had accumulated R2.7 billion at the beginning of this financial year.

How many precious lives could this money have saved?

This Department is failing our people, and it is even clearer that they don't care. This department needs to be placed under administration before more lives are lost unnecessarily.

Furthermore, this uncaring government needs to be voted out of power in the 2024 elections so that our citizens can once again receive quality health services and enjoy improved health and rising opportunities.