

Hospital backlog delays justice Xoliswa Zulu

More than 100 people arrested for mostly serious crimes, who claim they need mental observation as part of their defence, are waiting up to six months for psychiatric evaluations.

Staff and bed shortages at Fort Napier Hospital in Pietermaritzburg—the only hospital in KwaZulu-Natal that provides the service—have resulted in a backlog of more than 130 people awaiting evaluation.

The KZN Department of Health has admitted there is a problem and that Fort Napier only has enough staff to manage 90 observation cases at any one time.

Department of Health spokesman Leon Mbangwa said most of the people waiting to be evaluated had been arrested on serious charges such as murder and rape.

Mbangwa added that some suspects, whose evaluations had been completed, had not been fetched from the hospital and were taking up beds.

“The process can seem slow, but ... the law instructs that the accused be sent for observation for a period of 30 days. The accused is also seen by three psychiatrists, who have to interview the accused regularly.”

South African Prisoners' Organisation for Human Rights spokesman Golden Miles Bhudu said: “Nobody is interested in what happens to the prisoners. What is happening is irregular and illegal.”

Among the accused criminals awaiting mental evaluation are:

- § Dhanendra Heeralall, who is accused of stabbing his wife to death and attempting to cover it up by claiming they had been hijacked. He will only get a bed at Fort Napier early next year;
- § Rape accused Shadrack Makhetha who was booked to be evaluated in May, but will only get a bed on November 10;
- § Lungisani Qhugha who is charged with housebreaking and theft. He was to be evaluated in May, but will only be admitted on November 27;
- § Thembi Zulu who is charged with armed robbery with aggravating circumstances. She was to undergo mental observation in March, but will now be admitted on August 29;
- § Nkosinathi Zikhali who is charged with robbery. He will be evaluated in December, nine months after his initial booking was made.