

STOP STOCKOUTS PRESS RELEASE

No action from Free State Health MEC despite extensive evidence of crisis in provincial healthcare system

Stop Stock Outs Project and TAC call for urgent plan to remedy drug supply problems, involves patients

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JOHANNESBURG/BLOEMFONTEIN – The Free State provincial healthcare system, on which hundreds of thousands of people depend, is still in crisis and plagued by perpetual stock outs and shortages of essential medicines, according to a new Stop Stock Outs Project (SSP) survey. The snap survey indicates no improvement in the availability of essential medication, a dangerous situation that was first exposed in a SSP national survey in November 2013.

Almost 3 million people live in the Free State and the province has the lowest life expectancy in the country¹ and an unemployment rate of 40%.² The Free State department of health has also recently dismissed hundreds of Community Health Workers, many of whom were later arrested and detained after protests demanding dignified working conditions.

On 31 July 2014 the SSP alerted Free State MEC for health, Dr Benny Malakoane, to the latest findings about the untenable situation, providing recommendations and demanding urgent action from the MEC to avert loss of health and life. To date there has been no constructive response from the MEC on how the situation is being addressed.

The SSP findings come on top of an alarming “dues out list” from Free State Medical Depot, dated 19 June 2014, in which the Free State department of health confirms that over 200 essential medical items were out of stock at the depot. From January through July 2014, the SSP received ongoing reports of stock outs and shortages of medication in the province prompting the survey, which sought to provide insight into the state of the provincial medicine supply chain. The survey revealed:

- All six of the facilities surveyed had experienced a stock out of an essential medication during the last three months
- Among the 14 patients interviewed from 12 clinics around the province:
 - Six patients had been sent home without essential medication (due to stock outs);
 - Three had been given smaller quantities of prescribed medication (due to shortages);
 - One patient’s antiretroviral treatment was switched back and forth from the standardised Fixed Dose Combination pill to the previous single molecule formulations (three pills per day).

“These results indicate a crisis on a consistent or worse scale than that shown in our prior research. Each of the stock outs and shortages above is a failure that places lives and health at risk. The MEC’s criticism of our survey as “unscientific” is confused and misplaced. Our objective was to better understand where and why people are in danger of going without life-saving medication. This information is a valuable tool that should be used to address immediate crisis and guide long-term solutions” says Monique Lines, SSP Project Manager.

The SSP has been monitoring the availability of essential medications in the Free State for over a year now. In November 2013, the SSP [released a report](#) detailing the results of the largest survey ever conducted on the extent of stock outs and shortages of medicines in South Africa. The Free State was by far the worst performing province:

¹ Stats SA mid-year population estimates 2013 (Figures 1 and 2)

² Stats SA Census 2011 (figure 3.31: “Expanded unemployment” rate)

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- 54% of facilities in the Free State reported having experienced a shortage or stock outs of antiretroviral (ARV) or TB treatment in the three-month period prior to being surveyed;
- Three out of the five districts that were worst affected by stock outs of ARV and TB medication in the country were in the Free State: Fezile Dabi (66.7% of facilities reported stock outs/shortages), T Mofutsanyane (61.4%) and Mangaung (55.6%).

The SSP has assessed the Free State department of health's performance in fulfilling its constitutional obligation to provide healthcare services to some of South Africa's poorest people on the basis of the four sources:

- SSP field researcher interviews with patients and at facilities (19 June – 4 July 2014);
- Numerous reports of stock outs and shortages in different areas in the Free State (1 January – 21 July 2014);
- The Free State health department's "dues out" list from the Free State Medical Depot reporting 200 drugs as out of stock at the depot (19 June 2014);
- The SSP National Stock Outs Survey from September to October 2013.

"On the basis of the SSP's research, which confirms our experience on the ground and in communities, our conclusion is that shortages and stock outs of essential medicines in the Free State continue to put thousands of people at severe risk. By not acting immediately to resolve the stock outs, the authorities display a callous attitude to the reality of patients without other options" said Anele Yawa, General Secretary of Treatment Action Campaign.

"We have repeatedly warned, and shown with evidence, that the conditions of the Free State healthcare system place these people at severe risk. We call for urgent, sustained action to protect the rights, health and lives of the people of the Free State."

The SSP calls on the Free State MEC for health, Dr Benny Malakoane to provide the following:

- A transparent stock out response plan with clear timelines and assigned accountable staff who will resolve the issues; and
- Positive and constructive ongoing engagement with civil society groups during the implementation of this plan as well as directly engaging the patients served by the Free State department of health.

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NOTE TO EDITORS:

The Stop Stock Outs Project's original November 2013 report detailing the situation regarding medicine stock outs and shortages in 2,139 health facilities across South Africa's nine provinces can be located here:

http://stockouts.org/uploads/3/3/1/1/3311088/stop_stockouts_report_2013pdf_1.pdf

