

Nurses' union accuses agencies of exploitation

CHANTELLE BENJAMIN
Chief Reporter

THE Democratic Nursing Organisation of SA (Denosa) has accused nursing agencies of exploiting the staffing crisis and poor salaries in hospitals by encouraging nurses to moonlight and work long hours while the government turns a blind eye.

Working double shifts left nurses exhausted and unable to function in their full-time jobs, which in turn left the healthcare sector all the poorer, it said yesterday.

Denosa said the "recycling" of nurses made it possible for the government to ignore nursing shortages and the low salaries paid to nurses, as agency staff were filling many gaps and moonlighting to enable them to keep up with day-to-day costs.

It was also costing the government more as agency-placed nurses earned about 20% more for overtime than nurses employed full-time by hospitals.

The union called on the government yesterday to speed up its efforts to address both the poor salaries and staff shortages that were driving nurses away from the sector or into second jobs.

A recent international survey by the International Council of Nurses and Pfizer revealed that more than half of nurses (53%) in SA said their workload was worse today than five years ago and only a third in SA thought they would still be in the profession in five years' time.

When it comes to vacancies, the latest figures gathered in SA show a 40,3% vacancy rate in nursing sister posts and a 37% vacancy in health professional posts.

Charisma, the country's largest nursing placement agency, said 83% of the nursing staff on their books were permanently employed elsewhere.

Denosa spokesman Asanda Fongqo said yesterday: "Moonlighting by nurses through agency placement must be understood in the right context, which is that the



Nursing can involve long working hours, sometimes in more than one job.

material conditions of nurses — poor pay and the high cost of living — are factors that push nurses to compromise their deserved right to good health and sufficient rest.

"Agencies gleefully exploit this situation. At face value agencies may seem to be the answer to the staffing crisis, but they are in fact recycling the same nurses and the department has also fallen into this trap of recycling its permanent employees through agencies."

Liona Grobler, a spokeswoman for Charisma, said the problem was the lack of regulation in the sector.

"The problem is not with the legitimate agencies who pay tax and UIF but with the small fly-by-night companies that are springing up," she said. "There are 595 agencies registered with the Nursing Council and none of them are regulated."

Grobler denied that legitimate agencies were exploiting nurses. "Fifty percent of the nurses earn more from their agency placements than they do in their day jobs," she said.

The Department of Health and health ministry were unavailable for comment.
benjamin@bdfm.co.za