

Union warns against ban on brokers

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THE BANNING of labour brokers in Gauteng's state hospitals will harm patients, according to trade union Solidarity.

It said the Gauteng Department of Health and Social Development was planning to phase out certain categories of nurses who are employed by labour brokers.

The union's charge comes as the Parliament's portfolio committee on labour begins holding public hearings on labour brokers in four provinces from tomorrow.

Last month, the committee held a two-day public hearing in Parliament where stakeholders, including trade unions, civil society and labour brokers, were given an opportunity to present their views on labour brokering.

Cosatu, at its recent 10th national congress, adopted a critical resolution calling on the complete ban of labour brokers, saying they were engaged in modern slavery.

Labour Minister Membathisi Mdladlana is another critic and has said that they should be banned outright.

In her state of the province speech in June, Gauteng Premier Nomvula Mokonyane said: "Currently, we have an abnormal situation in which most of the professional nurses are answerable to labour brokers because they have been placed by them in employment instead of the government. We are going to rein in such anomalies in our institutions. By doing this, we will bring an end to



Premier Nomvula Mokonyane says she wants to end the exploitation of nurses.

PHOTO: CHRIS COLLINGRIDGE

abuse and exploitation of this category of workers, thus improving service delivery."

Solidarity said the department's plans to phase out agency staff at state hospitals would have serious consequences in the provision of essential medical services.

It said its reaction came after the department recently sent a notice to state hospitals announcing that the services of enrolled nurses (those with a two-year qualification) and nursing assistants (those with a one-year qualification) would be

suspended at the end of this month.

According to Solidarity spokesman, Jaco Kleynhans, there were serious shortages in the profession, and to a certain degree these were filled by labour brokers.

Solidarity warned that the scrapping of labour brokers could punish service delivery in hospitals, which was already unstable. It would also place even more pressure on existing staff as well as on specialist units, such as intensive care, maternity and trauma.

of this year there would be more than 32 300 vacant nursing positions in the public sector. According to optimistic projections, there were only about 19 300 nurses available to fill the positions.

"Until South Africa has eradicated the shortage of nursing skills, agency staff will have to remain an essential component in the battle for good health," said Kleynhans.

Mandla Sidu, a spokesman for the Gauteng's Department of Health and Social Development, confirmed that not using labour brokers was in line with the policy adopted by the MEC for the portfolio, Qedani Mahlangu.

On Thursday, the DA and the Congress of the People (Cope) issued a joint position paper in Parliament on labour brokers.

The two political parties said they believed that the labour brokering industry was a critical component of the country's economy and should continue to exist.

To ensure that it operated ethically they proposed a self-regulation system, similar to that which operated in a variety of other industries, with peers and the government monitoring the process.

"The concerns that have been raised regarding the exploitation of individuals employed by labour brokers are in some cases real, and need urgent attention. It is likely, however, that an outright ban or excessive legislation will deepen exploitation by driving the industry underground," said the two parties.

Kleynhans said: "In 2007, there were already 40.8 million South Africans without medical aid, of whom the majority had to rely on medical services in the public sector."

Solidarity said earlier this year that it had conducted research into the extent of the shortage of registered nurses in the country. According to Kleynhans, the shortages were of such a nature that they were threatening the levels of service delivery to patients.

The research showed that, among other things, at the end