

MEDIA RELEASE **PSA calls for urgent action following fire at Steve Biko Academic Hospital**

DATE 26 November 2024

EMBARGO None

ENQUIRIES communication@psa.co.za

The Public Servants Association (PSA) is extremely concerned about safety at healthcare facilities following a fire incident at Steve Biko Academic Hospital in Tshwane in the early hours of 23 November 2024, which led to the evacuation of intensive care unit (ICU).

Reports indicate that smoke engulfed the sixth floor of the Hospital, affecting 20 adult patients and one paediatric patient in the ICU. The fire started in the seventh-floor plant room, where lithium-ion batteries that serve as a backup system in the uninterrupted power system (UPS) ignited. A Hospital electrician isolated the power supply to these batteries, which prevented further damage. Swift action by Hospital management, staff, and Tshwane Emergency Services ensured the safe evacuation of patients to unaffected wards. No injuries were reported, and the fire was extinguished by 04:42.

Whilst the prompt and effective action in preventing further harm during this potentially life-threatening incident is commended, this fire highlights critical concerns about the maintenance of hospital infrastructure and the adequacy of fire safety measures in public healthcare facilities.

The PSA therefore calls for an immediate and comprehensive audit of the infrastructure at Steve Biko Academic Hospital and all public healthcare facilities to identify and address fire hazards and other risks. Given the fire's origin in the lithium-ion battery backup system, the PSA urges the Department of Health to investigate the safety of similar systems at all hospitals and implement stricter maintenance protocols. In addition, regular fire drills must be conducted and the provision of adequate training for hospital staff must be prioritised to ensure readiness for emergencies.

The PSA further calls for a thorough investigation into the cause of the fire to determine if negligence played a role and to prevent a recurrence. This incident underscores the vulnerability of South Africa's public healthcare infrastructure. Steve Biko Academic Hospital is one of the country's leading tertiary healthcare facilities, and any compromise in its services directly impacts the health of thousands of South Africans. Ensuring the safety of patients, staff, and infrastructure must be an immediate and an ongoing priority for government. The PSA remains committed to advocating for safer working conditions for healthcare workers and improved services for the public. The PSA will monitor the investigation's progress and continue to engage with the relevant authorities to ensure accountability and preventive measures being implemented.

END

