

Madam Speaker, I have called for this urgent debate because people who need public health services are suffering with the closure of a major specialist hospital in the middle of a raging epidemic.

The fire that caused this closure happened two months ago.

We have had various promises at various times that sections of the hospital that were undamaged would be re-opened, but this has not happened.

We all understand the need to comply with safety standards, but it is a matter of priorities. Technical issues should either be resolved speedily or exemption obtained using emergency powers or state of disaster legislation.

I have to agree with the chairperson of the parliamentary portfolio committee on health, Dr Sibongiseni Dhlomo, who said in a statement:

“It will be practically impossible for the province to manage the third wave without the more than 1 000 beds, which is inclusive of 124 intensive care unit beds at Charlotte Maxeke Hospital.”

Patients from Charlotte Maxeke are currently in hospitals around the province, crowding them even as Covid-19 cases flood in.

Many cancer patients have had their treatment disrupted, and dialysis patients have to travel to Helen Joseph Hospital.

Linda Greeff of the Cancer Alliance says that “The Cancer Crisis can be equated to *Life Esidimeni* ... This is indeed a violation of basic human rights.”

This morning I got a call from a kidney dialysis patient who told me she spends the whole day at the Helen Joseph Hospital and only gets back home at one in the morning because they use the machines at night.

I get constant calls from patients who can't easily get their medicine from another health facility.

We are told that the delay is because the Johannesburg Metro Council wants the original building plans, they want fire evacuation routes, and they want compliant fire doors.

A doctor told me that they were even quibbling about the exit signs.

I am puzzled as to why the Johannesburg Metro Council is now insisting on measures that it did not insist on before when they supposedly did fire safety checks.

Why were the fire doors not upgraded long ago?

This is what happens with years of poor maintenance and non-compliance with basic safety standards.

This same incompetence is delaying the re-opening of this hospital.

And why can't a firm date be given even now?

This is definitely costing lives.

This year has been proclaimed as the year of Charlotte Maxeke, a truly worthy woman.

It is a disgrace that the hospital that bears her name is abandoned as we speak.

The wards are empty, equipment is lying idle, and the staff are dispersed all over the province.

Doctors are pleading for the hospital to reopen as they worry about the lives of their suffering patients.

Does anyone in this Legislature believe that this hospital still honours the name of Charlotte Maxeke?

Surely, surely, this provincial government can do better than this.