

Lesotho to upgrade national laboratories to accelerate fight against TB

The management of TB requires precise diagnosis which in itself requires a hazard-free environment. Lesotho is meeting the challenge

TB service delivery in the Kingdom of Lesotho is impacted by long delays between sample collection and receiving test results, especially in the rural areas and townships where TB laboratories are not operating optimally. In extreme cases, this process can take as long as three months and there is a backlog of over 900 TB samples. This leads to delayed commencement of treatment. The Ministry of Health has earmarked the renovation of two TB laboratories – National TB Reference Laboratory and Leribe TB Laboratory – to address these problems and bottlenecks. In addition, upgrades are planned at three Correctional Service Facilities with the goal of creating TB isolation wings to reduce exposure to TB infection and transmission among prison inmates.

The upgrades are aimed at improving the delivery of TB services to ensure they meet occupational health and safety, and infection control standards. The scope of the planned renovations of the laboratories is informed by the World Health Organization comprehensive assessment, together with one conducted by the Africa Centre for Disease Control. During a joint project support mission to the country conducted by the World Bank, NEPAD Agency and East Central and Southern Africa Health Community, the Deputy Principle Secretary in the Ministry of Health in Lesotho, Palesa Mokete confirmed that an Engineer has since been employed under the Southern Africa Tuberculosis and Health Systems Support (SATBHSS) project to oversee and supervise these works from a technical perspective with support from other government units.

'We have a backlog of TB samples at the National TB Reference Laboratory and renovating this laboratory will help to reduce these numbers,' Ms. Mokete said.

The current state of the TB laboratories poses many hazards to service providers and to the management of specimens according to internationally accepted standards. The Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Maseithati Mabeleng, emphasised that her Ministry will take responsibility for implementing the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) component on the project to accelerate progress.

'The SATBHSS project comes at the right time and will answer most of the questions that have hindered TB screening, as well as access to social benefits for the ex-miners who once worked in South Africa and left without accessing their benefits', Mrs Mabeleng said.

Through the SATBHSS project, the national OSH profile in Lesotho will be updated. The Permanent



Storage of samples in the laboratories will be improved

Secretary at the Ministry of Mining, Soaile Mochaba, acknowledged the work being done under the SATBHSS project through a multi-sectoral approach involving different ministries. He reminded everyone that the biggest driver of TB and occupational lung diseases in Lesotho is mining, so the mining companies must be stakeholders in addressing the scourge of TB.

'This project is creating synergies that will ensure our Ministries work collaboratively to implement multi-sectoral approaches to kick out TB and occupational lung diseases in Lesotho', Mochaba said.

The renovations will involve removing and replacing the current roof covering with more economical and maintenance-free aluminium sisalation membrane to prevent rain water penetration and formation of water drops caused by water vapour, especially during the rainy season. In addition, the damaged doors to the secure areas will be replaced by new ones with a heated viewing window. The new doors to the Ante Rooms will be replaced by aluminium ones that interlock with electromagnetic latches to ensure that when one door is open the other must be closed.

Furthermore, the existing wooden pass boxes will be replaced with heavy-duty metal pass boxes in GL powder coating. The cracked walls will be reinforced and broken water pipes replaced to ensure they are sealed, safeguarding specimens in the laboratory and preventing accidents.

The upgraded laboratories will aim to attain certification level with international accepted standards for TB laboratories and meet standards for occupational health and safety. Revamping the will help in help the laboratories to operate optimally and strengthen efforts to end TB by 2030 in Africa.

This article was written by a member of the NEPAD communications team