



MEDIA STATEMENT

Angel of Mercy



A lack of facilities for terminally ill mesothelioma sufferers results in unnecessary suffering according to a palliative care nurse who has cared for more than 100 mesothelioma and lung cancer sufferers in the greater Kuruman district in the Northern Cape.

Sister Phemelo Magabanyane was addressing delegates at the International Mesothelioma Interest Group Conference at the Cape Town International Convention Centre.

Mesothelioma is a deadly cancer of the pleura or peritoneum diagnosed up to 40 years after exposure to asbestos.

Sister Magabanyane works for the Asbestos Relief Trust and the Kgalagadi Relief Trust, which were set up in 2003 and 2006 respectively by the former owners of numerous asbestos mines to compensate mineworkers suffering from asbestos related diseases. The trusts have paid out more than R358 million to settle more than 5 400 claims.

“Due to the remote location and the scarcity of medical resources – and recognising that financial relief was not enough - the trusts established a Palliative Care Programme in March 2007,” she said. “Palliative care improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing problems associated with the life-threatening illness. We achieve this through the prevention and relief of suffering. We also pay attention to other physical, psychological and spiritual needs.”

She described travelling hundreds of kilometres every day on dirt roads to visit patients in remote locations where basic services are lacking, let alone sophisticated pain management medicine and equipment.

“You do the best you can with what you have. The patients and their families are extremely grateful that somebody cares enough to help them and I sometimes think that the emotional support is as important as the pain relief.”

Apart from having limited access to specialist facilities, Sister Magabanyane wrestles with challenges associated with cultural beliefs and traditional practices, myths about pain control treatment, addiction to morphine syrup, self-medication and the use of herbal medication.

Although the programme is funded by the trusts, her services are available to all victims of asbestos exposure.

She said it was important for palliative care professionals to acknowledge the emotional burden of helping terminally ill patients on a daily basis and to pay attention to their own physical and psychological well-being.