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Netcare Alberlito Hospital shifts focus in 2023

Carefully considered changes reflect patient demand

In a country with limited healthcare resources, Netcare hospital division has a responsibility to ensure available healthcare capacity is best utilised to fulfil the needs of the communities each hospital serves, upholding patient safety and reflecting local demand.

"The second floor of Netcare Alberlito hospital currently houses 37 beds collectively comprising 15 maternity beds, seven neonatal intensive care beds and 15 paediatric beds. At this hospital, these services have been severely underutilised, and after 15 years, the growth in the demand for these highly resource-intensive units has not materialised," says Sara Nayager, regional manager of Netcare's KZN hospital division.

"It has regrettably become clear that the hospital is seeing insufficient obstetric cases with little real demand for the maternity, neonatal intensive care, and paediatric beds currently available.

"These specialised services, which families only require very occasionally, are available at other healthcare facilities, including at Netcare hospitals in Durban, uMhlanga and surrounds. Netcare Alberlito Hospital has taken the difficult decision to reallocate this capacity in the interest of patient safety and meeting the needs of the community, and because these units are no longer sustainable," she says.

Against this background, in June this year the Department of Health revealed that more than 6.5 million people in South Africa are in need of professional mental health intervention, of which almost 1.3 million require care for severe psychiatric conditions.

What is changing as from May 2023

- The maternity, neonatal and paediatric units on the second floor of Netcare Alberlito Hospital will, with the Department of Health's approval, be replaced with mental health services for adolescents and adults, which are in short supply throughout South Africa and very much so in KwaZulu-Natal.
- Of the child patients cared for at Netcare Alberlito Hospital, only 20% require overnight admission. The current 12-bed day ward and three high care beds will be made available for paediatric day cases. Eighty percent of paediatric healthcare services will remain available from healthcare professionals at the hospital and essentially all that is changing is our ability to accommodate paediatric patients overnight.

What is NOT changing



- The hospital will remain fully resourced for all paediatric and maternity emergencies.
- Same day case admissions for children's healthcare services will also continue. However, the hospital will no longer accommodate overnight paediatric patients. Day case admissions will continue uninterrupted and be accommodated in dedicated day wards.
- There will be no job losses for Netcare employees, in fact it is expected that jobs will be created.
- The healthcare disciplines currently offered by specialist physicians at Netcare Alberlito Hospital include, among others, general surgery, urology, gynaecology, orthopaedics, ear nose and throat, plastic and reconstructive surgery, ophthalmology, pulmonology, endocrinology, and cardiology. All these services will continue to be offered at the high levels of service that the Ballito community has become accustomed to.
- Netcare Alberlito Hospital will continue to provide comprehensive emergency medical services to the community. On average the emergency department sees more than 800 patients per month, with as many as 100 of these patients suffering from serious conditions that require immediate lifesaving intervention.
- The emergency department is supported by Netcare 911's road service ambulances, which are based at the hospital, and a dedicated aeromedical service, based at Virginia Airport in Durban, to provide the highest levels of pre-hospital care to patients who have been seriously injured in road or other accidents, or whose health has been compromised.

A considered decision

"As far back as 2010 Netcare has engaged with healthcare professionals to address the significant concerns about the sustainability and ongoing safety of the maternity, neonatal and paediatric service. With the persistent lack of growth becoming clear, hospital management once again met with healthcare professionals in August 2021," Nayager explains.

Following this meeting Netcare granted two new obstetricians practising privileges at Netcare Alberlito Hospital to assist in providing dedicated after-hours call cover, amongst other services, and engaged with local business and community stakeholders regarding the hospital's activity and future. "While we remain grateful for their time and advice, we have not seen growth in these services and there is currently only one obstetrician providing call cover in the emergency department," she says.

"Since its inception 15 years ago, records show that there have on average only been 15 births a month in the hospital, with an average of only 13 per month in 2022. In the last 6 years 99.5% of deliveries were by caesarean section and in six years, only six vaginal deliveries have taken place at the hospital, illustrating a lack of demand that is making these services unfeasible.

There is robust evidence from the USA, Germany, Japan and England showing that both mothers and their babies are at higher risk of complications when they have their deliveries at hospitals with an extremely low number of births, as opposed to those who deliver at high-volume hospitals.



"In addition, the persistent low birth numbers make it economically unviable to continue providing a maternity service. Midwives are highly trained and in great demand nationally. The unit requires at least eight midwives to deliver a 24-hour service that adequately fulfils the needs of mothers and their babies in the maternity setting," Nayager adds.

Exceedingly low numbers of in-hospital deliveries, and none at all taking place at the hospital from 2019 to 2021, have made it exceedingly difficult for midwives to maintain and develop their obstetric skills at Netcare Alberlito Hospital, and this has also led to great difficulty in attracting and retaining staff.

"We have been in close consultation with staff, doctors, and other service providers to discuss the changes that are being planned well ahead of time. The Department of Health, unions and other key stakeholders have also been kept updated on all developments.

"We must acknowledge where we can do better and we trust that these changes will provide more benefit for the communities we serve, ensuring our services continue to reflect the evolving healthcare needs of Ballito and surrounds," Nayager concludes.

References and further reading

- 1: *The Association between Hospital Obstetrical Volume and Maternal Postpartum Complications.* Kyser et al. *Am J Obstet Gynecol.* 2012 Jul; 207(1): 42.e1–42.17.
- 2: *The association between hospital obstetric volume and perinatal outcomes in California.* Snowden et a. *Am J Obstet Gynecol.* 2012 Dec;207(6): 478.e1-7.
- *Determining obstetric patient safety indicators: the differences in neonatal outcome measures between different-sized delivery units.* Pyykönen et al. *BJOG.* 2014 Mar;121(4):430-7. doi: 10.1111/1471-0528.12507.
- *Ends*

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