# Leprosy Returns to Swaziland

## A Wake-Up Call for a Broken Healthcare System

Swaziland recently received a stark reminder that its healthcare system is far from equipped to handle even basic public health needs. A confirmed case of leprosy-the first in years-was finally diagnosed at the Mbabane Government Hospital. The patient, a 20-year-old man who has been living in Kakhoza township in Manzini, had been showing symptoms for nearly a decade.

For years, this young man sought medical attention from clinics and hospitals around Swaziland, yet no one could accurately diagnose his condition. Over time, his symptoms worsened, but the system meant to support him repeatedly failed. This isn't just an isolated oversight; it's a sign of deep-rooted issues in Swaziland's healthcare system that have left the most vulnerable without care.

Swaziland's healthcare has been on a steady decline for years, and this case of leprosy brings that into sharper focus. Basic healthcare services are stretched beyond their limits, often lacking supplies, medical equipment, and properly trained staff. The government's response? Silence. Although leprosy hasn't made news in decades, the Ministry of Health has avoided publicly addressing the case or taking immediate action to prevent further spread. Even communities in Kakhoza, where the man has lived, remain unaware of their potential exposure, as neither the government nor the media has raised any alarm.

Health Minister Lizzie Nkosi previously commented on a Times of Swaziland report that mentioned the poor conditions many leprosy patients endure. She acknowledged the stigma and poverty associated with the disease, yet this reality has done little to push the government toward better healthcare policies or patient support. While this lone statement may have addressed stigma, it hasn't translated into meaningful action.

Leprosy, though rare and not highly contagious, demands early detection to prevent lasting disability. It's a preventable disease if diagnosed early and treated with readily available antibiotics. Yet, Swaziland's healthcare system is struggling to diagnose and treat even the most common illnesses, let alone manage diseases with more complex treatment needs.

Historically, leprosy has been well-controlled globally, with most countries achieving near-elimination. Swaziland, which hadn't seen a significant case in years, may have grown complacent, leading to a situation where the healthcare system was unprepared for such an outbreak.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), leprosy is curable, and treatment in the early stages can prevent disability—emphasising how crucial early detection is in managing the disease.

Swaziland's Ministry of Health has a long-standing program for leprosy care, having sent specialists for training in Tanzania on clinical diagnosis, testing, and treatment of the disease since the early 1990s. These efforts were meant to ensure that medical professionals would be equipped to detect and manage cases promptly. Despite this, the system's failure to diagnose this young man's symptoms over the years raises concerns about the effectiveness of these initiatives and the government's broader commitment to quality healthcare.

Swaziland's health system is riddled with failures—from clinics that lack basic supplies to hospitals that operate with outdated equipment. Health professionals report feeling overwhelmed and unsupported. A 2019 survey found that public hospitals lacked essential resources, and healthcare workers frequently cited burnout as a major issue due to understaffing and low pay. But the recent leprosy case suggests that the situation has deteriorated further, exposing an unresponsive government that lets citizens bear the burden of this neglect.

Medical tenders intended to supply hospitals with drugs and equipment have often been exploited for personal profit. Essential medicines are often missing from hospitals.

These corruption scandals cost lives. Drugs shortages mean that easily treatable diseases. Patients find themselves hopping from clinic to clinic only to be turned away.

The confirmed leprosy case in Kakhoza reveals a frightening truth: Swaziland's healthcare system is collapsing under the weight of corruption, neglect, and lack of accountability. The government's failure to act leaves citizens unprotected and in the dark, particularly when it comes to diseases that demand quick responses. Without immediate intervention, more lives may be endangered.

For the government to run helter-skelter to patch up the healthcare system only in times of visible crisis isn't enough. Swaziland needs a clear, consistent approach to public health, one that focuses on providing for the people rather than hiding failures or wasting resources through corrupt deals. The current regime, however, is incapable of providing or ensuring that.

Healthcare is a basic human right, not a privilege for the few who can afford private clinics or foreign treatment. The people of Swaziland deserve a government that prioritizes public health and holds itself accountable for meeting the needs of its citizens.

This crisis calls for change, not just in healthcare but in governance. The people of Swaziland have a duty to push for transparency, accountability, and real investment in their healthcare system. Swaziland's health system needs a complete overhaul—one that puts people first and ensures that no one is left behind.