

# Pikitup strike: Sick in the city?

By: **NONI MOKATI**

Johannesburg - Could Joburg be nearing the tipping point for something like an outbreak of bubonic plague?

It was 112 years ago that Brickfields, in present-day Newtown, was evacuated, with residents being moved to a sanitary camp in Klipspruit as plague hit the city.

Now as the Pikitup strike enters its third week, a rampant rodent infestation and an explosion in the number of cockroaches, maggots, flies and other pests have sparked fears that an outbreak of diseases last seen in the city more than a century ago could be a real threat.

A health official said this week the city was heading towards an environmental health crisis, while a pest control expert warned there could be outbreaks of diseases and pest infestations in two or three months.

"It is important to remember that rodents can act as direct vectors (carriers) for bubonic plague, leptospirosis and a myriad other diseases," Lynette Cokayne, chief executive officer of the South African Pest Control Association, said this week.

According to Cokayne, pest control companies are often called out to kill flies, rats, cockroaches and ants, especially in summer, but these companies have been under greater pressure because of the refuse collectors' strikes.

"Pest species need water, food and shelter to live and breed.

"Garbage consists of perishables that are a food source for pests.

"It is also well known that up to 100 viruses, some of them dangerous like hepatitis and polio, are excreted in human faeces, so nappy waste needs to be safely disposed of without delay, in line with the regulations, to prevent outbreaks of gastroenteritis and other illnesses."

Cokayne said all areas affected by the strike needed to be assessed to determine the extent of rat infestations.

It was important to understand the biology and behaviour of pests, especially rats, and how quickly they bred, to formulate an integrated pest management plan.

Dr Chika Asomugha, a senior medical adviser for public health programmes at the Gauteng Department of Health, said something as simple as a person living with tuberculosis coughing into a tissue and throwing it into a heap of rubbish on the street posed a health risk.

It was imperative that parents closely monitored their children.

"There are many children rummaging and playing with the garbage on the streets," Asomugha said.

"We are calling on parents to ensure that when they get back into the house these children wash their hands with soap and water.

"This also applies to people who have begun collecting bins and are being paid on the side. If you cough and you have been collecting refuse, you need to see your doctor immediately."

Asomugha said the piling up of refuse had not yet led to an increase in the number of people being admitted to hospitals.

But the public had to be on the lookout for diseases and illnesses such as gastroenteritis, typhoid, tetanus and hepatitis A and E.

Asomugha also pointed out that some people were allergic to air pollution and certain stench from uncollected rubbish.

"People with respiratory ailments should cover their mouths and noses when passing through an area that has heaps of rubbish."

With typhoid cases having been reported in Joburg early this year, the Department of Health remained on high alert, Asomugha said.

"We may not see (cases) right away because of the incubation period, but we are monitoring the situation."

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