

Life

Portraits of
Lives Lost

Esidimeni



Harriet Perlman & Mark Lewis



Review by Moira Levy

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It's hard going, but readers of *Life Esidimeni: Portraits of Lives Lost* must keep going to the very last page of this book because it is our responsibility as citizens to make sure this tragedy never happens again and that those in positions of authority who abuse their power are called to account. "That is what the inquest has been about – justice through accountability," Adila Hassim, lead counsel in the Life Esidimeni arbitration and inquest, writes in the closing essay. Hassim reminds us that the Life Esidimeni tragedy would have been avoided if those in charge did what they were supposed to do.

But they didn't, and 144 of society's most vulnerable and needy died under hideous conditions of abuse and neglect. Between October 2015 and the end of June 2016, more than 1,000 mental healthcare patients housed by a South African provincial health department were moved from the institution where they lived (Life Esidimeni) to hopelessly ill-equipped, and sometimes unlicensed, NGOs. The reason was to save money.

Hassim writes: "The conditions that led to the Life Esidimeni disaster had nothing to do with policy or resources. It had everything to do with civil servants who did not perform their jobs in a manner consistent with the law, or with the rights of the patients and the families."

She makes a point that is repeated throughout the book, that the provincial Department of Health and MEC were warned many times by many sources that the outcome of closing the Life Esidimeni facility and transferring its patients to ill-equipped and even unlicensed NGOs would lead to what Hassim calls "a tragedy of devastating proportions".

"[N]ot a single individual in the department [of health] took responsibility. Not one. The attitude of many of the officials, particularly the MEC for Health in the provincial administration, was arrogant and callous.

"The Life Esidimeni catastrophe is not only the result of a failed system but also of the uncaring, callous individuals who acted within it."

That word, "callous", comes up repeatedly throughout the book. And the interviews in which the family members recount the circumstances of their loved ones' deaths illustrate just how callous those officials to whom they had entrusted their loved ones for treatment and safe-keeping turned out to be.

Writer and producer of film, TV and print media Harriet Perlman and photographer Mark Lewis have compiled 43 harrowing testimonies from family members of some of those who died. Over four years they travelled vast distances to remote parts of the country to visit these bereft families. The "portraits" in the book's title presumably refer to the powerfully evocative photos taken by Lewis of the family members as well as the pictures they have selected of their beloved late mother, brother, uncle, wife. Some are beautifully framed, others simply family snaps of happier times, or merely the first page of an ID book if that's all they have.

Not all of them have any pictures to comfort them. On his way to testify at the arbitration in 2017 Lesiba Leroaba left the only photo he had of his late brother, Mthofela, in the taxi. "I felt so miserable when I realised I had lost it." His brother died in Mamelodi Day Hospital after being admitted with a broken ankle and a head injury. Doctors were told he was injured while playing soccer; according to his death certificate he had died of "natural causes".

Sophie Goitsemang Mahlatsi also has only her memories left. She recalls how happy her late aunt, Christina, was during the many years she lived at the Life Esidimeni facility in Randfontein, Gauteng. "I was not aware of the intended closure of Life Esidimeni. I only became aware that Christina had been removed from Life Esidimeni when I received a phone call from a hospital to tell me that Christina had been admitted there," suffering from diarrhoea. She died five days later. The hospital was near Cullinan; Sophie could not afford the two-hour ride from Soweto where she lived.

Variations of her story are repeated throughout the book. Some interviewees knew about the pending move, but nothing more. They tell of finding the gates at Life Esidimeni locked when they arrived for family visits and being informed by security guards that the patients had gone, they didn't know where to. Further protracted and frantic inquiries led them from NGO to NGO. Family members recount their horror at finding their loved ones shockingly wasted and clearly starving, begging for water, hungry, dirty and unwashed, shivering in inadequate clothes and without bedding. Many searches ended at a mortuary or even a graveyard where the patient had already been buried.

Daniel and Lydia Maretele both lost their jobs during their year-long hunt for their older sister, Maria, because their employers wouldn't give them time off to search. "After a while we started to give up. We did not know if she was alive, safe, being fed, or getting her medication," Daniel said. In November 2017 he got the news that Maria had died – in January that year. Officials refused to tell him where her body had been buried. Daniel



had to get a court order to eventually be told that she had been laid to rest in the grounds of Takalani Children's Home.

A number of the patients landed up at Takalani, despite an urgent email sent to the department by Cassey Chambers, Operations Director of the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (Sadag), warning that Takalani was completely unsuitable for adults with severe mental health problems. Her email warned that "the harm that may arise from these circumstances is considerable, imminent and likely to be irreparable." She received no reply.

We should never forget how the Life Esidimeni victims perished. Their deaths are a stark reminder of how 'horribly wrong' things can get with an arrogant, callous and unaccountable political leadership.

The first person to die was Deborah Phetla. The inquest showed she had brown paper and plastic in her stomach. She died alone in what her family said looked like a storeroom and when they found her body at a private undertaker, "her arm was standing at a 90-degree angle to the rest of her body, and there was blood all over her face," according to her brother.

Many more stories like these have still to told; the final toll exposed after the inquest is appalling. We read in an essay in the book by former Health Ombudsman Professor Malegapuru Makgoba that "[i]t is now undisputed that as a result of their move from Life Esidimeni facilities, 144 mental healthcare users died and 1,418 were exposed to trauma and morbidity, among other results, but survived. Of the known survivors, the state informs us that the whereabouts of 44 other mental healthcare users remain unknown.

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Christine Nxumalo and her late sister Virginia Machpelah, a Life Esidimeni victim.

Source: Mark Lewis

