



Will Health Department be embarrassed?

By Louise Flanagan

The Department of Health's failure to pay its bills has meant HIV-positive mothers can't get milk formula to feed their babies, putting those infants at risk of HIV infection.

The failure to pay is likely to embarrass the department as it emerged over the weekend that the government had spent more than R75-million on Jacob Zuma's inauguration party.

On Friday, food company Nestle told The Star that it had stopped delivering to defaulting provinces.

"These guys have not been paying," said Nestle southern African region spokesperson Theo Mxakwe.

He would not identify the provinces or say how much money was involved, but said the defaulters had been sent numerous reminders and that, as a business, Nestle could not provide the formula for free.

Mxakwe said there was no shortage on Nestle's side - "we have ample stock of formula" - and the company would be able to resume deliveries within a day or two of being paid.

He said the payment difficulties had been going on for about six months. "We stopped delivery in April."

The Department of Health did not respond to The Star's request for comment.

HIV-positive mothers are often advised not to breastfeed their babies because of the danger of infecting their babies with HIV through their milk.

In Limpopo, the Thohoyandou Victim Empowerment Programme (TVEP) heard of the milk formula shortage and visited three clinics to check.

None of the three had any milk, said the TVEP's Tian Johnson. He said one clinic had not had milk formula for three months, and had begged the NGO for help supplying the 300 tins needed each month - enough to feed about 60 babies.

Clinic staff had told him that some mothers were now breastfeeding their babies because they could not afford to buy formula.

Johnson investigated and was told that the department owed Nestle as much as R20-million and that the company would deliver again as soon as it was paid.

Limpopo denied any payment problem.

"The last payment to Nestle from the Department of Health and Social Development in Limpopo was made on April 30, 2009. Two weeks back we ordered the milk

formula - more than 147 thousand tins," said department spokesperson Sophy Sekole.

"According to our system we don't owe Nestle money."

She said the TVEP had alerted the department to the problem, and the service provider, Vuwa, would deliver the milk formula today.

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