

Disturbing documentary depicts Bara meltdown

By Kanina Foss

The day starts with multiple stab wounds - the weapon was a jam jar - and ends with a drunk driver dying in the early hours of the morning.

In the 24 hours between, the trauma unit at Soweto's Chris Hani-Baragwanath Hospital is forced to close twice because it is full to capacity and the doctors need time to clear the backlog.

It's a payday weekend - a time when alcohol flows freely in South Africa's biggest township, and staff and resources are pushed to their limits.

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Drunk patients are left near a fire escape to sober up before they are treated, by mid-morning the unit has no more ventilators for incoming patients, and the whole place is plunged into darkness when the electricity cuts out.

way or simply disappear.

A stab wound patient arrives at the hospital a full 10 hours after his injury occurred because the ambulance was tied up with other cases, and is told to find his own way to the x-ray department, a five-minute walk from the trauma unit. Patients often lose their

This 24-hour shift in Bara's trauma unit is the subject of the first in an eight-part documentary series called Saving Soweto, created by South African filmmakers Lisa Henry and Shareen Anderson, and currently being broadcast on Al Jazeera.

It follows Bara's doctors and nurses as they try to cope with the physical and emotional demands of working in the massive, chronically under-resourced hospital.

"When it gets busy, we have probably about a third of the amount of space that we need," says medical officer Dr Patrick MacGoey.

Patients often lose their way or simply disappear

Despite their lack of experience, interns are heavily relied upon to keep things functioning, and are often faced with life-and-death situations.

At the end of his shift, MacGoey, who is hoping he won't fall asleep on his way home, says: "I guess if you're working in the emergency department anywhere in the world, then you see pretty much the worst of society and the worst of what one human can do to another. Every day we see people who have been murdered, assaulted, raped."

Part one of Saving Soweto will be broadcast on Al Jazeera (DStv channel 406) on Thursday at 5.30am. Part two will be broadcast on Friday, at 12.30am. Both parts are also available on YouTube.