



## The South Africa Cholera Crisis of 2000-2002

**Kwa-Zulu Natal is one of the states in the African country of South Africa. It has a population of about 9.3 million people. As of the 2001 Census 22.9% of the population in KwaZulu-Natal aged 20 years or more have received no education, while only 4.8% have higher education.**

At first when people were ill, it was thought that they had gastroenteritis, a very serious and unpleasant illness which gives you a very upset stomach and diarrhea. However, it turned out to be even worse: people were ill with cholera.



### What is cholera?

**Cholera is an infectious disease caused by bacteria that gets into water. Symptoms include diarrhea, stomach craps and vomiting. The illness also makes its victims become very dehydrated and it is this dehydration that kills many people. Most people who have treatment for the disease recover.**

### Causes of the epidemic

1. The cause of this epidemic was traced to a shortage of water, which led the people in many areas to fetch their drinking water from local rivers. Pressured by international lenders such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the government adopted a conservative fiscal measure, known as "cost recovery," which requires public services such as water, electricity, and telecommunications to pay for themselves, often through increased fees; it also encourages turning those utilities over to private companies. For people living in these communities and others like them, the "cost recovery" policy meant a dramatic increase in the price of utilities such as electricity and water -- even as South Africa's economy has rapidly shed jobs for unskilled/illiterate workers. If people could not pay their water bill, the water was cut off.
2. As the cutoffs spread, so too did cholera. Increasing numbers of poor South Africans headed to polluted rivers, streams, even open pits to draw water for bathing, cooking, and drinking. Public-health researchers concluded that the epidemic began in the Empangeni region within weeks of the first water disconnection, and from there the waterborne disease quickly fanned out into seven of South Africa's nine provinces.
3. "Empangeni" derives its name from the Zulu word "phanga," which, roughly translated, means "to grab." It is a reference to the high number of crocodile attacks that once occurred on the Mlathuze River. Home to South Africa's largest sugar mill, as well as paper factories, aluminum smelters, mines, and upscale game farms, Empangeni is surrounded by Ngwelezana, an all-black township, and the villages of the Madlebe, which during apartheid were autonomous black homelands, or bantustans, that provided white-owned business with cheap labor.
4. The river is polluted with a variety of waste materials, and as a result of the legacy of apartheid, many of the houses in these areas did not have toilet facilities though some of them had latrines. In the two years from 2000 to 2002, KwaZulu-Natal's public hospitals reported nearly 114,000 cases of cholera, more than five times as many as had been reported in the province over the previous 20 years combined.
5. Part of the problem, says David Sanders, a professor of public health at the University of the Western Cape, is that while the government has expanded delivery of clean water, it has not made much of a dent in providing sewage systems. "The problem is very simple," he says. "People didn't have sanitation and so they [defecate] in the river. People didn't have money to pay for their water and so they went to the river for water."
6. Many women have low levels of health literacy and thus are not trained in personal hygiene practices to protect their families. They need education about keeping cooking pots and utensils free from germs, particularly from flies.

### What needs to be done

Several water and health experts have recommended the following measures to prevent further outbreaks of cholera:

- To make adjustments in the south African government's policy of cost recovery.
- To train people, especially women, on safe hygiene practices such as:
  - How to treat water before drinking and to know the difference between safe and unsafe water.
  - Effective hand washing – when it is important and how often to do it
- To build proper latrines away from water sources and to train people about safe sewage and waste disposal.
- To train people, especially women, on how to handle food to avoid it being contaminated before serving to people
- To provide a steady supply of clean water to avoid the use of polluted water.