

Shocking increase in infant murders in Johannesburg

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Johannesburg police have reported a shocking increase in gruesome infant murders, with up to 10 newborn babies found dead in a month at two police stations alone in the city.

Child protection agencies are also seeing an increase in the number of children being abandoned - some deliberately left to die.

The Big Shoe Foundation's Luke Lamprecht told the Saturday Star this week that at least half of the 70 children brought to their organisation every month had been abandoned. If they hadn't been found, they would have died.

In a recent attempted murder, a newborn baby was found flung from the 10th floor of a block of flats. And in other horrific incidents, numerous others were dumped in dustbins, drains, alleys, fields or buckets.

'They wrap them in plastic bags and drop them in dustbins and drains'

A prosecutor at a local magistrate's court, who may not be named, has seen 20 separate cases in the past year where the mothers have been charged with concealment of birth. Up to 80 percent of those arrested are young Zimbabwean women.

Police believe the spate of baby murders has been caused by women going to herbal doctors, who conduct illegal abortions on women often well beyond the time limit for legal abortions.

Johannesburg police officers told of their horror at finding the dead babies. "They wrap them in plastic bags and drop them in dustbins and drains. The clever ones don't dump the foetus close to where they stay, and go to another suburb. They will wrap it in a plastic bag and throw it along the side of the road or in a bin," one said.

Another officer said they had linked many of the murders to illegal full-term abortions by these herbalists.

The challenge was tracing the herbalists, who used newspapers to advertise their illegal abortions but gave false addresses. "When the pregnant woman gets there and finds that it's not the doctor's rooms, they then call the doctor and are fetched from that premises and taken to another place."

Usually they are taken to an abandoned building or an old toilet. The woman will be given two tablets to drink and told that the foetus will be flushed away.

The drug, Cytotec, is a schedule 4 drug that is not available over the counter. While its registered use is for stomach ulcers and the reduction and inhibition of stomach acid, it is not advised for use by pregnant women because it causes uterine contractions, which induce the abortion.

"The pregnant woman will go home, but instead of the baby being flushed away as she has been told, she will have a normal birth. In some cases the children are born alive but die later because of the medication."

Other women, who are in labour, will be taken to hospital where they will have an operation to remove the baby - and it will be found to be dead. The cause of death will often be heart failure.

Another officer told the Saturday Star of dumped babies being recovered by vagrants looking for food, who pass them on to council cleaners, who inform the police.

"When there is rotten blood, flies will gather. People notice. Many of the dirty abortions are unusually smelly."

In one case, a woman threw her child from the 10th floor of a building into an alley. The child was still alive despite breaking almost every bone in her body.

In another recent case, an illegal termination took place at the Lister Building in the Joburg CBD. The woman, aged 24, went into labour at home and was rushed to hospital. The baby was born three months premature.

The woman took the baby from the hospital and dumped her in a river. Acting on a tip-off, police arrested her.

In one murder by a teen mother, the officer told how the mother had kicked the child while it was still breathing. The newborn later died.

In another illegal termination, the parents and grandparents thought the child was dead. When they discovered it wasn't, they beat it to death and then burnt the corpse to get rid of the evidence.

"The long-term consequences," said the officer, "is that the battered children who survive this, only to be abandoned and recovered, often have brain damage or cerebral palsy because of the shaking. Later they suffer emotional problems because they don't have a primary caregiver. It's an ongoing vicious cycle."