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voice of

Sanjay Erra is a senior Environmental Health Officer (EHO) in the eThekweni municipality, based in offices in Tongaat and dealing with areas as diverse as the millionaire's playground of Umhlanga Rocks to informal settlements such as Gwala's Farm.

His work is extremely varied. On any one day he could be called on to check the emission levels of a factory to ensure it isn't polluting the air, inspect a crèche or restaurant or deal with complaints about flies or rats.

"Because we don't have a full component of staff, we are very complaints oriented. We deal with complaints first and then do the routine work that we have to do."

He and his two fellow EHOs are also responsible for checking the environmental impact assessments of all new developments.

"Consultants do the environmental impact assessments then we scrutinise them to ensure that every potential health problem is dealt with," says Erra.

The EHPs also ensure that the area's drinking water is clean and that the sea water along their stretch of coast remains pristine, as well as checking on the standards of food production and hygiene of the food shops in the area.

an Environmental Health Officer

Sanjay Erra

eThekweni municipality, KwaZulu-Natal

“Every month we sample food from various shops. We also sample the domestic water supply, sea water and the outflows from sewerage purification plants,” says Erra.

In addition, they ensure that work places put in measures to safeguard employees’ health and safety.

The work is very challenging, and often requires the EHOs to interact with high level technical experts employed by industries. “It can be quite technical and you need to do thorough research, especially when dealing with high-powered industries. You need to know your stuff when liaising with their engineers and consultants.”

He enjoys dealing with the range of communities in his area, from the rich to those with very little – as their environmental health needs are very different.

But the work of Erra and his colleagues is hampered by a lack of staff and resources.

They do not have a single computer to share between them. That also means they don’t have access to the Internet to do research. They also have no administrative back-up.

“There is a lot of work and we get a lot of calls but there is very little awareness of the role of environmental health in protecting communities and preventing them from getting sick.”