

The public needs to keep us on our toes, David Mabuza says about healthcare crisis – Business Day 19 October 2018

Speaking at a presidential health summit, the deputy president said: ‘We need a systemic change that will outlive us and become a gift to the new generation’

SA’s health system is in crisis and needs urgent attention to be put to right, Deputy President David Mabuza said on Friday.

Addressing delegates at a two-day presidential health summit in Boksburg, he said both the public and private sectors faced challenges that compromised patient care.

“We need a systemic change that will outlive us and become a gift to the new generation,” he said.

The summit highlights the importance President Cyril Ramaphosa is attaching to healthcare, and follows a similar meeting he convened on National Health Insurance (NHI) in August. His economic stimulus package, announced in September, contained a commitment to reprioritise government spending that included filling 2,200 critical health posts and the purchase of essential items such as linen and beds. He also announced a R400bn infrastructure fund, which is expected to include an allocation for health.

The summit has attracted 800 senior representatives from business, civil society, labour and academia, and includes top executives from the private hospital groups, pharmaceutical companies and the medical schemes industry.

Mabuza said the president had assumed stewardship of the NHI process and improving the health system “to ensure the country can achieve affordable quality healthcare within a reasonable time”.

Sketching the challenges facing SA’s healthcare system, he called for greater collaboration between the state and civil society.

“The public needs to keep us on our toes to ensure the population gets what is due to them,” he said, describing health activists monitoring medicine shortages as an example of the kind of compact that was needed.

He also announced the launch of a national health campaign dubbed “Cheko Impilo”, which will focus on testing and treating people with HIV, tuberculosis, sexually transmitted infections, and noncommunicable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.

Business Unity SA CEO Tanya Cohen said business was ready and willing to work with the government to improve SA’s healthcare.

“As with land, mining and energy, we regard health and education as key policy areas that need to be tackled if we are going to improve our collective prospects,” Cohen said.

SA is at a crisis point, with the majority of South Africans unable to access decent healthcare, she said, citing the collapse of state oncology services in KwaZulu-Natal, medicine shortages,

and Gauteng's scandal when mentally ill patients were moved from Life Esidemeni's care to unlicensed nongovernmental organisations, which led to the deaths of 144 people.

Only 8.87-million South Africans, or 15.61% of the population could afford private healthcare via medical scheme cover in 2017, according to the Council for Medical Schemes, leaving the rest of the population dependent on public health services.

Cohen said the private healthcare sector is highly regarded worldwide, but acknowledged it had challenges of its own. Busa is committed to ensuring the concerns identified in the final report of the Competition Commission's health market inquiry are addressed.

"The private sector is a key building block in ensuring our broader participation in the health sector, alongside that of other social partners," Cohen said.

The two-day summit has gathered top leadership figures from across the spectrum, including senior executives from SA's private hospital groups, pharmaceutical companies, the medical scheme industry, as well as unions, activists and academics.

Deputy president of the National Health, Education and Allied Workers Union (Nehawu) Mike Shingange said workers who belonged to medical schemes confronted the shortcomings of both the public and private sectors. "Many of us have medical aids that cannot take care of us all year, or all our dependents. We end up taking out of our pockets [for relatives] in the townships and in the rural areas. We represent both the employed, and the suffering people of our community," he said.

Shingange urged government to speed up the development of the state-owned pharmaceutical company Ketlaphela, saying it would reduce SA's reliance on imports.

The summit has nine commissions, which are expected to discuss SA's key healthcare problems, ranging from human resources to the management of public finances. Cohen said it is important for the summit to conclude with a clear roadmap for action, and a process for monitoring progress.