

Poor will bear cost of NHI scheme

THE National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme would actually work against its stated objective to provide improved quality health services for all South Africans, according to the Democratic Alliance (DA). Speaking at a media briefing on the scheme, due to be rolled out from next year, DA parliamentary leader Lindiwe Mazibuko said the poor would suffer more under the NHI because it would divert billions of rand from other development challenges such as the provision of basic services, education and housing. Earlier this year, Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan said about R500m was expected to be set aside in the 2012 budget to fund pilot sites for the NHI. However, Mr Gordhan allayed fear that the cost of implementing the programme would overburden the state. Also speaking at the briefing, DA health spokesman Mike Waters said the creation of a centralised fund would over-bureaucratise the public healthcare system, making it more inefficient and costly than it is. He said a centralised fund would also carry the increased risk of corruption and financial mismanagement. Waters said the DA believed that by strengthening the positive elements of the public sector and removing its deficiencies, the healthcare of all South Africans would be improved. He said that several lessons could be learnt from the Western Cape. Waters said the DA's health policy in the Western Cape centred on strengthening the governance mechanisms of the public health system and creating the necessary incentives for ensuring that healthcare practitioners delivered optimal performance. He said the DA believed this should form the cornerstone of a proper national health policy. Waters said the DA's alternative to the NHI centred on infusing accountability, affordability and efficiency into every level of healthcare. Casper Venter, MD of HealthMan consultancy and a spokesman for the South African Private Practitioners' Forum, said the government needed to make its intentions clear on how the NHI would be funded. He said if it were funded from general taxes, it would require an average 13 percent increase in tax revenue or up to a six percent increase in marginal taxes and this was not affordable. Department of Health spokesman Fidel Hadebe said that finalisation of the NHI was still under way so he did not understand the value of the noise the DA was making on the sidelines. He said South Africans would determine the nature of the NHI.

Bekezela Phakathi: Business Day, 7 December 2011