

Green paper on NHI 'contains inaccuracies, lacks evidence'

THE green paper on National Health Insurance (NHI) has come in for criticism with Wits University professor Alex van der Heever saying it does not provide a framework for turning around the health system, that there is no detail on critical reforms mentioned and that it appears to be asking for a blank cheque. Prof van der Heever was speaking at a function of the Professional Provident Society in Durban earlier this week. Prof van der Heever of the Graduate School of Public and Development Management said that many health sector companies were aware the NHI proposals "can't happen". Prof van der Heever said that the paper contained inaccuracies. He said that evidence was largely missing, or where drawn upon was mostly inaccurate, which raised serious questions about the quality of the Cabinet's review processes. He said the content came across as a series of declarations rather than "a carefully crafted, evidence-based policy framework and that the paper often resorted to emotive language instead of evidence, which was inappropriate in a green paper". No definition of NHI was provided, which was odd in a document seeking to communicate with a lay public, he said. Giving examples of inaccuracies, Prof van der Heever said an introductory paragraph quoting three recommendations from a 2008 World Health Organisation report, purportedly to validate the NHI plan, was not the same as the real recommendations. Part of the proposal was to shift the state's medical purchasing functions from the provinces to central government, which was "a major shift in the way government operates, but there is no evaluation why this is so". This, he said, could wreck the hospital system if it did not work. Prof van der Heever said the appointment by Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi of a CEO at the central procurement agency was an odd proposal to have such a thin structure for such a large amount of procurement. He described as ill-conceived the proposal for the private healthcare sector to simply "go away" once the public healthcare sector was improved over five to 10 years and the NHI was funded with taxes equal to 3 percent of gross domestic product. Prof van der Heever said that even if they came about this institutional construct with the tax increase, this would not cause a consolidation in the market: people would not leave their medical schemes, he said. The paper said the amount spent in the private healthcare sector relative to the number of people covered, defeated the principles of social justice and equity. But Prof van der Heever said they were saying that because a person was spending so much on private healthcare, somehow it was harming people in the public sector. The paper claimed the private healthcare sector was not sustainable, but Prof van der Heever said the number of medical aid beneficiaries and large medical aid schemes was increasing. Department spokesman Fidel Radebe said that the NHI plan still had "a long process to go" in terms of parliamentary and public participation and "it is South Africans who will decide what they want, it is not only Mr van der Heever that matters.... He can say what he wants".

Edward West: Business Day, 18 November 2011