

Western Cape's NHI prejudices cause for concern

THE 10 pilot sites chosen to start the roll-out of National Health Insurance (NHI) on April 1 are scheduled to be announced this week. But the SA Medical Association (Sama) in the Western Cape is concerned about whether the province can run this health reform project successfully and without prejudice after MEC Theuns Botha recently opposed it. Botha said there was a rumour that the province had refused to participate in the NHI pilot, which was untrue. He said that although the Western Cape did not support the NHI green paper in its current format, it did not mean that the province would not participate in the project. Botha said research showed that the NHI would work against its stated objective to provide improved quality of health services. He said that, in fact, it would create a bureaucratic and inefficient healthcare superstructure that would diminish the quality of public healthcare. He said the NHI would fail to improve the quality of public healthcare, and would not adequately attend to accountability and management structures., and that instead of throwing money at a "problem" that would not solve healthcare challenges, the alternative to NHI should be universal healthcare that emulated what the Western Cape government was doing - providing transport, infrastructure and referring patients to regional and specialised facilities according to their medical needs. Botha said the Western Cape's model of healthcare leveraged the system's strengths, minimised its deficiencies and delivered good health service in a responsible manner. His statement dismayed Sama, whose regional chairman and national vice-chairman Mark Sonderup said Botha had implied that his department was willing to embrace an "unworkable" initiative. Sonderup said Botha had failed to come up with solutions as significant as the NHI. He said Sama had repeatedly endorsed universal access to healthcare and felt that the NHI was the vehicle that the national government was using to get to that universal access. But he added that did not mean Sama fully supported what NHI proposed, but would fully engage with the government en route. Sonderup criticised Botha for making assumptions that public healthcare in the province was the only workable strategy. He said there were major problems in the Western Cape's public health system and the MEC could not just assume that all was well.

Sipokazi Fokazi: The Sunday Independent, 18 March 2012