

## *Strong medicine*

HEALTH Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi's efforts to improve the state of the public healthcare system should benefit patients using the private healthcare system. There is little doubt that the cost of private healthcare has spiralled. Those in the know are unequivocal that the biggest drivers are private hospitals and specialist doctors. These two groups are always very quick to protest such assertions, however medical schemes expenditure statistics confirm that this is indeed the case. Two major loopholes in legislation allow these providers to charge astronomical fees and Motsoaledi has now indicated that he will do all he can to close these gaps. The Minister told the Board of Healthcare Funders conference that he wants the Competition Commission to reverse a ruling that bars medical schemes from entering into price bargaining negotiations with service providers. This is a long overdue move as up to now the absence of this bargaining forum has created a route to spiralling healthcare costs in South Africa. Secondly, the Health Minister has set his sights on amending regulation 8 of the Medical Schemes Act, which deals with Prescribed Minimum Benefits (PMBs). Up to now this regulation has dictated that providers can charge whatever they wish for conditions or procedures that fall within the legislated PMBs and medical aids are compelled to pay. A lower court ruled last year that indeed medical schemes had to pay, but the BHF has taken it to the Supreme Court of Appeal. Motsoaledi has indicated that going the legal route was unnecessary and that the loophole had to be closed by parliament. The fundamental intention of PMBs was to protect patients, but the exploitation by providers has seen patients pay more as the cost of medical schemes soared and co-payments for other non-PMB conditions increased. All of these factors make a compelling case for the country to urgently continue its march to a universal healthcare system (National Health Insurance), where patients' capacity to pay does not dictate their access to good healthcare. Motsoaledi must be supported in his crusade to champion the rights of all patients whether they rely on the state or the private sector for their healthcare.

*Editorial Comment: The Cape Times, 1 August 2012*