

Doubts in Soweto over NHI plans

SOWETO'S private sector general practitioners (GPs) are broadly in favour of the government's plan to introduce the National Health Insurance (NHI), but question the state's capacity to do so, according to a survey by Murire & Company. Private sector GPs are an important aspect of the government's NHI pilot project under way in 10 health districts, as the state intends to contract their services to reduce the load on government clinics and hospitals. About 70 percent of the 40 doctors polled by the consulting firm said the fact that the government had failed to manage public hospitals and clinics effectively meant it would find it difficult to successfully implement NHI.

The survey covered about a quarter of the 166 GPs in private practice in Soweto, and was primarily aimed at better understanding their prescribing habits and relationships with drug manufacturers. Economic growth in Soweto means a growing proportion of its residents can now afford private healthcare, said Murire & Company partner Kennedy Murire. He said Soweto was rapidly developing: malls were going up, jobs were being created, bringing affordability of medical aid. The respondents to the survey had busy practices, and saw an average of 740 patients a month, which is the equivalent of 35-40 patients a day. Three-quarters of the medicines prescribed to these patients were provided on site, and four out of five of the prescriptions were for generics. There is a high proportion of dispensing doctors in townships such as Soweto, where historically retail pharmacies have been few and far between. Doctors were asked to name the "best manufacturer" for both generic and innovator companies, and ranked local generic drug maker Aspen Pharmacare and pharmaceutical firm Pfizer at the top. Positive attributes ascribed to these companies included good pricing and a wide range of effective products. The fact that the two companies had for years provided free educational programmes to doctors was likely to have contributed to the positive associations formed by GPs, said Murire.

The diseases getting the highest average number of prescriptions per doctor per month were HIV/AIDS and diabetes (both 41), peptic ulcers (39), pneumonia (37) and hypertension (37), gastroenteritis (36) and allergic rhinitis (36). Aspen Pharmacare SA CEO Noel Guliwe said the survey highlighted the growing burden of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. He said Soweto was certainly a growing market, but it was "never going to shoot the lights out". Guliwe also noted that residents of Soweto were less likely to be willing to pay for expensive, high-margin drugs that were protected by patents. The survey found that 58.6 percent of the patients belonged to a medical scheme, of whom 60 percent belonged to either Discovery Health medical scheme or the Government Employees' Medical Scheme.

Tamar Kahn: Business Day, 6 March 2013