

Health Minister's NHI trauma, tears

HEALTH Minister Aaron Motsoaledi has admitted that he underestimated the time it would take to lay the foundation for the National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme and confided to MPs that he was almost left in tears by the lack of interest in the scheme displayed by the Eastern Cape. Briefing MPs on the progress his department had made towards realising the NHI scheme, which the government hopes will guarantee universal quality healthcare, the Minister said he had hoped that it would take two months to consult key players in the districts where the scheme was being piloted. But the consultation process had gone on for nine months and the Eastern Cape's OR Tambo district, an area that Motsoaledi described as "extremely problematic", had yet to be consulted. The minister said tangible changes would only be visible after April at the pilot facilities, when the 600 GPs that had been contracted to 533 clinics were scheduled to begin their work. Rural clinics in the pilot districts would also acquire new medical equipment in April.

But the OR Tambo district would not benefit because of the problems the department had encountered there. Motsoaledi frankly admitted that if anyone wanted to assess, right now, the progress of the NHI, his department would probably get zero. The Minister told MPs that he "deliberately wanted excluded" the OR Tambo region, as the province had displayed no interest in the pilot NHI project and had failed to notify people when Motsoaledi went on a road show. He said when I left there he was nearly in tears and the province had failed him dismally. So he decided to let the other districts start in April and once they had started, he would go back to OR Tambo. The department was criticised at the committee meeting for under-expenditure of the NHI grant of R150 million. President Jacob Zuma in his State of the Nation address last week said the NHI scheme would be set up countrywide next year.

Sipokazi Fokazi: The Saturday Star, 23 February 2013