

Medical profession still wary over NHI

SOUTH Africa's medical profession remains divided on whether the National Health Insurance (NHI) initiative is the correct route to take, according to a new survey released by PPS. The survey of almost 700 medical professionals, found that 62 percent of those working in the public sector agreed with the principle behind the scheme, while 57 percent in the private sector felt the same. When asked whether NHI was the correct solution to fixing the ailing public health service, the figures revealed that 23 percent of respondents working in the public sector agreed, while 14 percent of those in the private sector said it was the right solution. Gerhard Joubert, head of group marketing and stakeholder relations at PPS, said that while government-employed medical professionals had slightly more optimism than those in the private sector, both segments still had concerns about the implementation of NHI. He said there was a general assumption that medical professionals in the private sector had more misgivings about NHI than those in the public, however, it was clear that both groups still had serious misgivings. Earlier this month, the SA Medical Association warned that the NHI scheme could collapse if it was implemented now, as the health system was already overwhelmed by decaying resources, noting that the public sector needed fewer managers and more people who could fix problems such as in-house electricians and plumbers. Joubert says the continued concerns that were being raised about the NHI scheme showed that far greater dialogue needed to be opened between government and the medical sector - both private and public - in order to find a workable solution. He said it was commonly accepted that the public healthcare system was in serious need of an overhaul and that something needed to be done about the fact that the vast majority of the population did not have access to adequate healthcare; but this must be done with buy-in from those working within the industry. Further figures released from the survey showed that those working in the public sector had a confidence level of 47 percent in the future of the healthcare system over the next five years. This dropped to a confidence level of 41 percent for those working in the private sector. Elsewhere, the survey also showed that confidence in their ability to earn a sufficient income should NHI be implemented was recorded at 60 percent for those in the public sector and 50 percent for those in the private sector. Joubert said it was critical, particularly since President Jacob Zuma confirmed in his State of the Nation address that an NHI fund would be set up in 2014, the same time as the insurance programme was expected to launch nationally, that such concerns were taken seriously. Commenting on the results of the survey, Professor Alex Van Den Heever, Chair of Social Security at the University of the Witwatersrand Graduate School of Public and Development Management, said that when many of the failures of the public health system were systemic, it was furthermore unclear which systemic problems a "fund" was meant to address and what it was meant to do - particularly as the public health budget was already a "fund" annually allocated by a parliament. He said given the absence of any concrete proposals, including those regarding governance of such a fund, questions remained as to whether it would have any proper purpose. Joubert said universal coverage was a worthwhile objective and the medical profession clearly supported the principles behind its achievements, but the priorities identified by the people working in the industry were to fix the problems in state services first.