

Many clinics and hospitals falling short

IMPROVED Sunday lunches may have bowled over some members of the public, but Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi's National Health Insurance plan is having a more humble beginning. One year after kicking off the R150-million NHI pilot sites in 11 of South Africa's 52 health districts, early assessments have highlighted dire shortcomings. The SUNDAY TIMES visited clinics and hospitals in nine of the 11 pilot sites and found a mixed bag of improvements and shortcomings. The NHI plan has been boosted by private doctors willing to help at state facilities once terms have been agreed, but a shortage of medicine, equipment and general staff shortages still plague the system. Dr Munyadziwa Kwindu, NHI coordinator for the Vhembe district in Limpopo, said facility improvement teams were examining infrastructure and equipment needs at each of the eight hospitals in the area. He said there was only one obstetrician in the district and that the area had no paediatrician, anaesthetist or advanced midwife practitioner. An infrastructure audit released to the Department of Health last week showed that some facilities were in a shocking condition. Motsoaledi said the report, handed to him on Friday last week, found that clinics and hospitals in some districts were in a dilapidated state, confirming what the department had suspected. The infrastructure study reviewed the facilities across a set of 23 different criteria, including external water and electrical supply, electrical condition and plumbing. It showed that health facilities in the OR Tambo, Vhembe, Gert Sibande and Thabo Mofutsanyane districts needed "urgent and extraordinary attention", said Motsoaledi. He said that in terms of infrastructure, OR Tambo was terrible and most of the facilities might need complete demolition. He said the department knew that Siloam Hospital in Vhembe, as well as the George Mukhari teaching hospital in Tshwane, also had to be rebuilt. A total of R150-million was allocated to the 11 districts in the 2012-13 financial year to support them in implementing "selected health service delivery interventions". Six provinces received R11.5-million each, the Free State was allocated R16.5-million, Gauteng got R31.5-million and KwaZulu-Natal R33-million. The NHI is being piloted in one district in each of eight provinces and in three districts in KwaZulu-Natal. But an NHI spending progress report dated February 22 showed that only R20.9-million had been spent by the provinces by January. However, all the provinces had made commitments to spend a total of nearly R99-million. Commitments made by the pilot districts included:

- Thabo Mofutsanyane (Free State), Tshwane and Vhembe: R24-million for buying basic equipment such as charts for conducting eye tests, blood pressure-monitoring machines and scales;
- Tshwane: R960 000 for contracting 12 general practitioners for three months;
- Vhembe: R1.8-million for computers to strengthen the district health management team;
- Gert Sibande (Mpumalanga): R2.2-million to buy furniture and clinical equipment for school health teams, family health teams and district clinical specialist teams; and,

- Eden (Western Cape): R1-million for the school health programme.

An intermittent dispensing crisis at the Limpopo medicine depot threatens the pilot project in the region. On the upside, private general practitioners are showing a willingness to work in the public sector, according to Motsoaledi. Dr Mzukisi Grootboom, chairman of the South African Medical Association, said it applauded doctors willing to work at government health facilities, but urged the state to come up with plans on how to do this. Health department director-general Precious Matsotso said the government was targeting 600 doctors this year to work at between 400 and 500 clinics and that it was assessing the readiness of the clinics before contracting private doctors. The Treasury has allocated R239-million for the salaries of contracting doctors.

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