

How Gordhan's expenditure cuts could affect health targets

FINANCE Minister Pravin Gordhan's "careful control of the wage bill" and expenditure on goods and services that he announced in his mid-term budget speech yesterday would impact negatively on health service delivery, according to health economist Daygan Eager from the Rural Health Advocacy Project at the University of the Witwatersrand. He said that if measures were not taken to deal with the provincial management crisis, it could mean that the health department might not be able to appoint enough health professionals within a short time frame for its National Health Insurance [NHI] scheme. The department would also face restrictions with the purchase of medical supplies, he added. Eager said that it was not clear where the additional funds needed for the NHI and upgrading of health facilities in particularly rural areas such as the Eastern Cape would come from. R491 893-million was budgeted for the NHI for the current financial year - Gordhan's mid-term budget adjusted this amount to R488 865-million. In the coming weeks, provincial health departments would draw up budgets based on the Gordhan's review. Eager said it was likely that provincial budget expenditure would not increase sufficiently. The review shows that the Health Department is falling behind on its cure rate target of 85 percent for lung TB patients per year - for the first half of the current financial year the rate stands at 75.2 percent. The performance is, however, an improvement compared with previous years. The expansion of the government's antiretroviral treatment programme for people with HIV is showing a strong performance with 221 498 of the annual target of 500 000 patients initiated on treatment for the first six months of the financial year. According to the review, the late start of antenatal care remains a challenge; just more than half (52.5 percent) of pregnant women accessed antenatal care during the first four weeks of pregnancy, compared with an annual target of 60 percent. The review states that the Health Department is addressing this challenge through the appointment of ward-based outreach teams that will improve access at community level. In the first four months of 2013/14, 2.7 percent of babies born to HIV-positive mothers tested positive for the virus - slightly above the target of two percent of the state's prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV programme.

Mia Malan: Mail & Guardian, 24 October 2013

