

Primary healthcare will be heartbeat of NHI

PRIMARY healthcare will be "the heartbeat" of South Africa's National Health Insurance (NHI), Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi told MPs on Wednesday afternoon as he tabled his department's annual report for the year to March 31 in parliament. His comments hinted at the contents of the long-awaited White Paper on NHI, which he said would emphasise preventing disease by re-engineering the country's primary healthcare services. He said it was the only thing that would save NHI and make it sustainable, explaining that a health system that prioritised "curative" services in hospitals would be much more costly. Auditor-General Terence Nombembe gave the department a clean audit for the 2012-13 financial year, but drew attention to its continued failure to implement proper systems for monitoring conditional grants. Conditional grants are ring-fenced funds earmarked for specific programmes, which are transferred from the Treasury to provincial health departments via the national department. The national department is supposed to monitor the performance of the provinces through periodic reports, and by visiting the provinces, to ensure the funds are used for their intended purpose. Nombembe said there were monitoring problems with all of the conditional grants overseen by the national department. These included the R8.88bn national tertiary services grant and the R8.77bn HIV/AIDS grant. Health director-general Precious Matsoso, who is the department's accounting officer, said in the annual report that where non-compliance with the Division of Revenue Act had occurred it had been rectified "by means of discussion and in some cases delaying transfers." The annual report shows only 52 percent of the R150m conditional grant for the pilot NHI project was spent, which the department said was largely due to delays in approving business plans, slow procurement of goods and services, and delays in appointing key staff. The report also shows significant underspending of donor funding, which includes money from the European Union and the Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, largely because projects were delayed. The report shows just R421m (45 percent) of the R936m donor budget for the year under review was spent. However, the department's spending capacity had improved markedly since last year, as it spent 99.4 percent of its R28.06bn budget, a 36 percent improvement on last year.

Tamar Kahn: Business Day, 17 October 2013