

NHI details promised before election in May

THE long-awaited details of the government's plans for National Health Insurance (NHI) should be revealed before the election on May 7, according to Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan. The Department of Health's White Paper on NHI and a financing paper from Treasury had been finalised and would shortly be tabled in the cabinet, he said. The government plans to introduce NHI to tackle the deep inequalities in access to healthcare. It has yet to detail what form it will take or the financing mechanisms to support it, but it is likely better-off consumers will pay higher taxes in some form. Gordhan would not be drawn on the paper's contents, saying "sneak previews are only for Hollywood movies". He said NHI was "premised on two pillars": improvements to public sector health delivery, and a reduction in the high cost of private healthcare. He said this approach was supported by the World Health Organisation. The budget review says funding to the National Department of Health will grow at a much faster rate than the provinces, due to the "centralising of certain functions", including the introduction of NHI. An indication of this came earlier this month, when Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi said his department would oversee construction of 43 new hospitals and more than 200 clinics in NHI pilot districts, a job that usually fall to provinces. There are currently two conditional grants supporting the national department's preliminary NHI work: the National Health Grant, and the NHI grant. Within the former, R1.2bn has been set aside over the medium-term to begin contracting with general practitioners, develop new reimbursement mechanisms for hospitals and improve their revenue management. It is off to a slow start, "because of delays in reaching agreement on remuneration of general practitioners", the review said. The Treasury's chief director for health and social development, Mark Blecher, said the plan was for private sector doctors to work in state facilities, at a set hourly rate. He said not too many GPs had signed up. Econex economist Marine Erasmus said the health budget held few surprises. She said it was very much the same as last year, but the fact that contracting with GPs had got off to a slow start was disappointing, as this was a key aspect of NHI. Consolidated government health spending is set to rise from R145.7bn in 2014-15 to R155bn in 2015-16 and R165bn in 2016-17, an average annual increase of 7.1 percent. New money has been added to the baseline for the cervical cancer vaccination programme, to be rolled out in schools next month. An extra R400m has been allocated to the Department of Health over the next two years to establish the programme, after which funds will be channelled to the provinces, said Dr Blecher. He said it was a long-term investment and it was thought that in time it would prevent up to 80 percent of cervical cancer deaths, which are 4 000 a year. Another R1bn has been allocated to the HIV/AIDS programme to take account of the 500 000 extra patients expected to go on treatment each year. About 2.5-million people are currently on antiretrovirals. A new forensic chemistry laboratory in Durban, which will support the three overloaded laboratories in Cape Town, Pretoria and Johannesburg, has been allocated the sum of R70m. The health budget also provides R269.2bn over three years for the Office of Health Standards Compliance, which is due to start its work this year.

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