

New hospitals and clinics for NHI on the cards

HEALTH Minister Aaron Motsoaledi has announced that the government plans to build 43 new hospitals over the next five years and at least 213 clinics in the 11 pilot districts for National Health Insurance (NHI). In stark contrast to most health infrastructure projects, which were managed by the provinces, the Cabinet and Treasury had given the go-ahead for this project to be run by the National Health Department, he said. It was an important departure, which the Minister said he hoped would give him the capacity to step in the moment anything went awry. The constitution defines health as a concurrent power, shared between national, provincial and local health authorities. While the National Health Department sets policies, service delivery is largely carried out by the provinces. Health infrastructure projects are typically managed by provincial health departments, with the actual building work done by the provincial departments of public works. The situation leaves the Minister to be judged on the performance of the provincial health departments, yet leaves him little scope to hold them to account. The Minister said he had asked the Treasury and Cabinet to give him "special permission" to take responsibility for the NHI pilot districts at national level. Motsoaledi maintained that some provinces were not spending their budgets on the functions for which the funds were allocated. For example, some provinces used NHI grants for other purposes. The problem was that the auditor-general held the national department to account for that money, not the provinces. The new hospitals and clinics that would be built in the pilot districts would be handed over to the provinces when they were completed, with a detailed maintenance plan, he said. Health director-general, Precious Matsoso, said maintenance would constitute a significant portion of the budget for the new hospitals and clinics. In the past, the failure to maintain health facilities had forced the government to replace them at a "huge cost," she said. A further 870 health facilities are to be upgraded in the 11 NHI pilot districts.

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