

## *The dangers of over-prescription*

HEALTH Minister Aaron Motsoaledi is possibly the most effective Minister in President Jacob Zuma's cabinet. His broad health policy, as captured in the projected National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme, is both ambitious (some say impossibly) and expensive (some say prohibitively). Yet he has marshalled his civil servants into providing an impressive detailed plan that has been enough to persuade a normally sceptical treasury to allocate substantial resources to the NHI. Wisely, the principles of the NHI were to be tested first in pilot projects in selected health facilities. These projects sensibly accommodated the fact that some of the most serious problems in public health are not medical (doctors, nurses, medicines), but rather to do with lack of managerial ability, unpaid bills, erratic supply and quality of food for patients, rampant theft of blankets, inadequate security for personnel and lifts that are chronically out of order. It seems that under Motsoaledi, these impediments to decent care could at last be addressed. But there is a danger that an effective Minister can also be a destructive Minister, in a way that a weak or unfocused Minister is not. Motsoaledi does have a legitimate argument about a pharmaceutical industry document that proposes ways of manipulating the policy process regarding new legislation on the expiry of patents. Clearly there needs to be a balance between motivating companies to research and develop new drugs, while ensuring that they are accessible (through generic replication) within a reasonable time to those who cannot afford them. Motsoaledi is not the only one who believes the balance at present is tilted in favour of the multinational pharmaceutical companies' protection of patents. But to term the multinationals' lobbying approach as "genocide" - the calculated murder of whole peoples - is both inaccurate and inflammatory. The excessive language undermines the rational underpinning of the search for the delicate balance between costs and accessibility, a balance that is so elusive in the health sector. Motsoaledi has also been trigger-happy in his approach to the advertising of alcoholic beverages. Again, there is common cause that alcohol abuse is linked to severe social damage in various ways: foetal alcohol syndrome, domestic violence, drunken driving. But unlike tobacco, which is intrinsically unhealthy whatever the degree of use, the consumption of alcohol in moderation is not damaging. As with cigarettes, on the other hand, there is no incontrovertible evidence that banning alcohol advertising would lead to a reduction in drinking or prevent more young people from becoming drinkers. Yet Motsoaledi treats that outcome as a self-evident fact. In his insistence that there must be a total ban on advertising of alcoholic beverages, the Minister likes to say that a loss of, say, 12 000 jobs must be set against the many more lives that would be saved through a ban. This sounds persuasive, but it is not at all clear that any lives would be saved in this way. If passed into law, it could be one of those measures that cost a great deal but produce few benefits beyond making the successful campaigners feel better. Again, Motsoaledi has a strong-enough case not to have to resort to extremes. He could demand more from the liquor industry in restricting advertising, or levy heavier taxes. If Motsoaledi is routinely aggressive, arguably unrealistic and given to extreme views on such issues, it could provoke questions about his larger project, the NHI. That could become a bottomless pit if it is not implemented properly. We would like to feel confident that if it turns out the NHI is not achievable, after all, the man in charge would have the courage and judgment to admit it. Unlike many of his cabinet colleagues, at least Motsoaledi is both trying to do the right thing and applying the necessary administrative energy to making it happen. He has even managed to shrug off what would for many ANC politicians be the kiss of death: an endorsement in the form of an "A" mark from those fashionable report cards that are generated by the Democratic Alliance and some media vehicles. Once his task at health has generated enough momentum, there is much work waiting for him in several other moribund portfolios.