

Government hostility towards private healthcare impedes NHI

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THE government's antipathy towards public-private partnerships is holding up implementation of the National Health Insurance (NHI), according to the head of the Independent Practitioners Association Foundation (IPAF), which represents doctors.

IPAF chairman Morgan Chetty, speaking at a media summit on Wednesday organised by medical scheme administrator Discovery Health, said: "The government sees the private sector as a threat.

"It fears divestiture and that the public health sector will give up its right to provide healthcare."

NHI envisages a universal health system to which everyone contributes according to their ability and which provides services that are free at the point of care.

The latest government policy on NHI, published in a white paper in December 2015, says services will be procured from accredited public and private sector providers.

However, the government's tone towards the private healthcare sector is largely hostile and Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi recently told the Competition Commission's health market inquiry that he was opposed to public-private partnerships in healthcare because they only benefited the private sector.

Motsoaledi was critical of private hospital group Netcare which, he said, had profited at the expense of Lesotho's poor because the partnership it had entered into with the government there for the Queen Mamohato Memorial Hospital had proved so expensive it consumed most of the country's health budget.

In a similar vein, the Free State health department was critical of the partnership it had entered into with Netcare for the Universitas-Pelonomi Hospital in Bloemfontein and told the inquiry it was considering an early exit from the contract.

Chetty said public-private partnerships had the potential to combine the best attributes of both sectors. They required good governance and a strong regulatory environment in order for the government to manage costs effectively, he said.

"If the government is setting the parameters, privatisation and divestiture should not be a threat," he said.

"Ideologists think government has all the solutions and should implement NHI. Pragmatists see a public-private solution. If we engage this debate in a positive way, NHI will be a reality in a much shorter time," he said.

Eric Buch, dean of health sciences at the University of Pretoria, said public-private partnerships came in many forms and could play a big role in postgraduate medical training. The university, for example, recently established a programme with the Pretoria Eye Hospital to enable its ophthalmology students to get experience with the specialists at that facility.

Discovery CEO Jonathan Broomberg said the NHI white paper failed to articulate a way of drawing on the expertise and resources in the private healthcare sector.

In a separate development, the Western Cape health department announced on Wednesday that it had entered into a public-private partnership called the Joint Project to shorten the waiting list for joint replacements, which stand at 4,000 patients in the province alone and about 35,000 nationally. The Joint Project was facilitated by Spear Health, established by former Western Cape health MEC Theuns Botha, and assists in the training of surgeons, as well as offers relief to patients, the department said in a statement.

BY TAMAR KAHN – Business Day