

CABINET DISCUSSIONS

National health bill gets a foot in the door

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The long-awaited National Health Insurance (NHI) Bill is before a cabinet subcommittee, a vital step before it can be signed off by the full Cabinet and tabled in Parliament.

A key provision of the bill will be the establishment of an NHI fund to pay for health services.

"It is likely to be discussed by Cabinet within the next couple of weeks," the health department's deputy director-general for regulation and compliance, Anban Pillay, said on Sunday.

His remarks follow President Cyril Ramaphosa's affirmation of the government's commitment to universal healthcare in his state of the nation address on Friday, when he said the NHI bill would be submitted to Parliament within weeks.

NHI is a set of health financing reforms to provide everyone with healthcare services free at the point of delivery. It is enshrined in the social solidarity principle that everyone should contribute according to their means and will receive benefits according to their needs, in effect ensuring the rich and healthy subsidise the poor and sick.

The government began piloting NHI in 2011, but has yet to drive through any significant reforms to breathe life into the policy. "The time has now arrived to finally implement universal health coverage through NHI," said Ramaphosa on Friday. Key NHI projects targeting society's most vulnerable people would begin in April, he said.

Pillay said Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi was in the process of appointing people to a number of NHI implementation committees. These appointments and the terms of reference of the committees would shortly be published in the government gazette.

The technical work of these committees would run independently of the legislative process to bring the bill into effect, he said. They would consider issues as NHI benefits, its human-resource requirements and health technology.

Ramaphosa also announced that the government would start a major cancer campaign in three months, similar to the government's HIV counselling and testing campaign. It would draw on the private sector, he said.

"We need to mobilise all resources to fight this disease," he said. The president also emphasised the government's commitment to combating SA's HIV/AIDS epidemic, promising to provide treatment to another 2-million people by 2020.

SA has the world's biggest HIV burden, with an estimated 7-million people with the disease. A little more than half of them are on treatment, according to the most recent estimates from UNAIDS.

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