

Activists call on President to tackle healthcare crisis: Business Day, 7 February 2019

HEALTH activists have called on President Cyril Ramaphosa to take concrete action to fix the health system rather than focusing on the long-promised National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme. The ANC-led government has been pushing for NHI since 2009 but has yet to drive through any reform to breathe life into the policy, which aims to provide everyone with health services that are free at the point of delivery. Referring to the three NHI policy papers published by the government, lobby group Section 27 said SA has been on the brink of major health system change for almost a decade. It said NHI has been discussed for years and made less tangible with each iteration of the policy. The first legislative steps towards establishing NHI are contained in the NHI Bill, which was published for public comment last June. The bill paves the way for the establishment of an NHI Fund that will purchase services from accredited public and private sector providers. It has been mired in controversy, after a leaked Treasury letter exposed an attempt by the president's adviser, Olive Shisana, to introduce sweeping changes to the proposed laws after the public comment period closed. The Cabinet rejected a revised version of the bill in December, and reconsidered it last week, but the government has remained tight-lipped about its content. Section 27 said government had become fixated on the NHI Bill, at the expense of fixing the health system. It said the creation of a fund does not itself improve the health system. The fund needs a system to buy services from. We do not have that system. Section 27 welcomed the fact that the Special Investigations Unit was expediting investigations and prosecutions in the health sector, and the appointment of more public healthcare workers as part of the President's economic stimulus package. But it said more needed to be done. However, SA's biggest trade union federation, Cosatu, said its members wanted to see more rapid progress on NHI. Its parliamentary spokesperson, Mathew Parks, said nurses, doctors and health workers need to see the government get serious about building the foundations for the NHI and fast-tracking its realisation. Yet, he said, all they see is austerity, having to work 48-hour shifts, lack of basic medicines and security, growing queues and poor infrastructure.