

NHI: Doctors will treat everyone, regardless of their ability to pay

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DOCTORS, nurses, dentists and hospitals will treat everyone when National Health Insurance (NHI) is rolled out, selecting them on the basis of how sick they are, rather than on their ability to pay. On Friday morning, Health Minister Zweli Mkhize gave Parliament more details on how NHI would work. In its draft form in 2018, the bill suggested NHI would be a single government-run medical fund, financing health services for rich and poor, and reporting to the Minister of Health. It is not clear what changes have been made to the bill by government since last year. Mkhize said that under NHI, healthcare would be the same for everyone, private and public, saying health workers “will be available to provide services equally”. He said currently, poor people often get second-rate healthcare, while wealthier people are able to afford good treatment. He added NHI is a way of providing good healthcare to all our people. Experts and companies have questioned how NHI would be funded. Estimates of the annual cost have ranged between R259-billion and R350-billion. Mkhize did not explain where the money would come from but said NHI would be the answer to current funds shortages in the health system. Mkhize said at present there was insufficient funding allocated for the health system. He said the current baseline of funding is below the expected level, considering the population size, disease burden and the expected quality of services required. Mkhize said the Health Department is engaging National Treasury to explore various modalities to adequately fund health services. He admitted that the R19-billion allocated for the next three years for dilapidated and decaying infrastructure was “grossly inadequate”.