

## **NHI seen as remedy for SA's ill-health**

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Johannesburg - There is no way one can argue that the current private healthcare system is stable. In fact, it's on the brink of collapse.

So said Humphrey Zokufa, managing director of the Board of Healthcare Funders of Southern Africa (BHF), on Tuesday in a joint briefing held with Health Minister Dr Aaron Motsoaledi to express their support of the government's plan for universal health coverage for South African citizens through the National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme.

"People are paying contributions to their medical schemes that are higher than inflation. They have to also pay co-payments, and their benefits are shrinking. People on medical aids are not necessarily happy. Medical aids too are bleeding, showing high deficits. The pool of insured people is not increasing and those who are insuring are ageing and getting sicker," Zokufa said.

The briefing follows an opinion piece written by the minister and published in the Sunday Times on Sunday.

On Tuesday, Motsoaledi said the briefing was to clarify the "scare tactics" people were being "misled" about issues related to the NHI.

Zokufa said the BHF - which represents more than 80 percent of the country's medical aid schemes and 60 percent of scheme administrators - was encouraged by the minister's clarifications, adding that, through the power of "pooling", everyone could be insured.

Motsoaledi also questioned the motives of NHI detractors.

"Are they basing their comments on self-interest? Are they really interested in providing healthcare for all South Africans? The pooling in the private sector is already happening... In 2005, we had over 200 medical schemes and that number has since dropped to just over 80 because of mergers and the realisation that there is power in pooling," said Motsoaledi.

The government was intervening in this space because it was accountable, the minister said.

"We're not sure why certain people say the white paper lacks detail when the detail will come through engagements... the government is being democratic and inviting people to participate and make submissions so as to put in the detail," he continued.

Motsoaledi said the current debate around the NHI was skewed and needed to be placed on the “right footing”.

“The United Nations has adopted universal health coverage and all countries under the UN have signed to that, not just South Africa.

“The universal access to quality healthcare for all, I emphasise for all, is nothing new... When I listen to various critiques of the NHI, no one is against it per se, but there is always a big but’ when saying a good system for all (instead) of a select few. We don’t accept that,” he said.

The minister explained how, through pooling, certain health-care costs were essentially curtailed, such as the cost of antiretroviral treatment, which in 2002 cost about R10 000 per patient and now costs just over R1 000 a patient through pooling.

Motsoaledi also cited examples of pooling for the sub-dermal implant and human papillomavirus vaccine.

“The National Development Plan (2030) says we must solve two problems in healthcare: one is the exorbitant price of private healthcare, the other is the lack of quality and efficacy in the public system, and we (government) accept both. But people want me to accept one, the public healthcare,” he said.

He added that their next target was companies offering “gap covers”, which were “selling sickness” and operating unregulated, leaving the industry open to abuse. “The Treasury is very unhappy. Very soon those plans will be abolished,” he warned.

*By VUYO MKIZE*