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NEWS ON GOVERNMENT January – June 2020

Medical negligence claims against the state soar to R104-bn

Claims for medical negligence against the state have more than tripled over the past four years, rising to a staggering R104.5-bn.

“Provincial health departments faced a four-fold increase in pay-outs to victims of medical negligence over the same period,” reported *Business Day* (27 January 2020).

According to the latest edition of *SA Health Review*, medical-negligence claims against the nine provinces rose steadily from R28.61-bn in 2014/2015, to R43.12-bn in 2015/2016; to R56.2-bn in 2016/2017; to R80.4-bn in 2017/2018; and then shot up 30.4% to R104.5-bn in 2018/2019.

The hardest hit provinces were Eastern Cape, Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. Provincial health departments also face a significant number of fraudulent claims, some of which are under investigation by the prosecuting authorities.

State laboratory fleeced of R93-m

“An elaborate R93-m scheme to defraud the National Health Laboratory Services (NHLS) was allegedly orchestrated by three of its former senior managers, who worked in tandem with a convicted fraudster,” reported *The Star* (12 March 2020). Thuso Motsepe, the former supply chain manager; Mthunzi Mthimkhulu, the former facilities manager; and Sibusiso Mthenjana, who was the head of the state entity’s legal department, are charged with tender fraud and corruption involving R93.7-m.

Mthimkhulu is also accused of stealing 17 cars belonging to the state entity.

“The accused allegedly worked in tandem with Pierre Kapia Petersen (MD of Blue Future) to fraudulently approve a lucrative tender in 2016 to supply the NHLS with the ‘provision, maintenance and support of end-user computer hardware for a period of three years’.”

‘NHI unlikely to be implemented by 2026’

In his National Budget Speech in Parliament, Finance Minister Tito Mboweni announced that R3.9-bn is to be cut from NHI expenditure.

According to Mark Blecher, Treasury’s chief director for health and social development, the Treasury has targeted underspending programmes for cuts to try to protect service delivery. R1.4-bn has been shifted out of the NHI indirect grant, managed by the National Health Department, due to slow spending on contracting with GPs, mental health and oncology services. R56-m has been set aside over the medium-term to strengthen the Department’s capacity to phase in NHI.

Although the health budget has increased by over R7-bn, this is a decrease in actual terms, said Director of Rural Health Advocacy Project (RHAP) Russell Rensburg – *News24* (27 February 2020). “It is unlikely that the NHI will be fully implemented by 2026 as outlined in the bill,” he remarked.

How did Cuban health workers register in just three days?

On 25 May, 28 Cuban doctors, part of a group of 187 healthcare workers, started working in Gauteng to assist with the COVID-19 outbreak. The group arrived in SA on April 27 and were allowed to register with the HPCSA within days due to a longstanding, streamlined process and one that - as of at least 2018 - was also supposed to apply to other HPCSA-vetted international medical schools.

Meanwhile many foreign-trained SA doctors said they were still waiting months, if not years, to register with the HPCSA to practice in the country.

According to a survey published in *SA Medical Journal* about 70% of 644 internationally trained SA doctors were either unemployed or not practicing medicine. Many doctors had either not taken the HPCSA exam, which was postponed during lockdown, or were still awaiting results.

Private sector complains about frosty treatment over Covid-19

Tension between private sector doctors and the government is coming to a head over a dispute about payment and legal immunity when it comes to treating COVID-19, reported *Daily Maverick* (28 May 2020).

“In a letter to members, the South African Private Practitioners’ Forum (SAPPF) says its repeated attempts to negotiate with the National Department of Health in ‘offering our support in combating this pandemic’ have not met with a satisfactory response. At the heart of the issue is the treatment of “state-responsibility patients” for Covid-19 in private medical facilities - and what the doctors will be paid.”

Medical experts rebel over SA’s ‘nonsensical’ lockdown strategy – Medical Brief 20 May 2020

“The SA government is coming under strong criticism from medical experts on its own ministerial advisory committee (MAC), who say the present lockdown has “no basis in science” and should be ended,” writes *MedicalBrief*. (20 May 2020).

Dr Glenda Gray, MAC member and chair of the **SA Medical Research Council**, said the strategy “is not based in science and is completely unmeasured”, in remarks to *News24*. “We are seeing children with malnutrition for the first time (at **Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital**).

MAC member, Professor Marc Mendelson said that phasing out the lockdown is not a science-led approach.

MAC member Professor Shabir Madhi said the government is “ill-informed” and questioned who had told the president that SA was doing well. He said the MAC was not asked about measures involved in lifting the lockdown.

According to *News24* reports that there was a swift crackdown by the **Health Department** on dissent among the ranks of scientific advisers. It says the advisers faced a hard-nosed dressing down from health officials during a heated MAC meeting.

