

## **Parliament extends deadline for NHI Bill submissions – Business Day 2 October 2019**

Business, the DA and civil society organisations welcome the two-week extension to allow them all to better scrutinise the bill's contents

Parliament has extended the public comment period for the National Health Insurance (NHI) Bill, after receiving requests for more time from numerous stakeholders, it said on Wednesday.

NHI is the government's plan for universal health coverage, which aims to provide services to the entire population free at the point of care. The first piece enabling legislation for NHI was tabled in parliament on August 8.

Parliament called for written submissions in early September, and set an initial deadline of October 11, which it has now extended until November 29.

The bill proposes the establishment of a central NHI fund that will buy services from accredited public- and private-sector providers, and proposes sweeping amendments to 11 other pieces of legislation, including the National Health Act, the Competition Act, and the Medical Schemes Act.

However, it creates uncertainty about the future role of medical schemes, an aspect that initially knocked the share price of JSE-listed Discovery, which owns SA's biggest medical scheme administrator, Discovery Health.

The chair of parliament's portfolio committee on health Sibongiseni Dhlomo said stakeholders had proposed mid-November as the closing date for written submission, but the committee had decided to extend the time by a further fortnight. There will be no further deadline extensions, he said in a statement.

The new deadline for written submissions will not affect the committee's programme for public hearings, which are due to begin in Mpumalanga on October 25, he said.

A wide range of organisations asked for a deadline extension, including Business Unity SA (Busa), the DA, and the Organisation Undoing Tax Abuse (Outa).

Busa has previously said its concerns about the bill extend beyond investor sentiment, as its members are directly and indirectly affected by any changes to the health system. Many employers subsidise their employees' medical scheme contributions, or provide health services directly.

Busa spokesperson Stavros Nicolaou welcomed the deadline extension, saying it will allow the organisation to consult more thoroughly with its various constituencies.

The DA's health spokesperson Siviwe Gwarube said many aspects of the bill are unclear. "The country is still none the wiser about the funding model of the NHI Bill, tax implications, the role of medical schemes, and how the quality of healthcare will be

improved. So during this time, we will push for these details to be made available so to inform the submissions that should be made by South Africans.”

Outa chair Heinrich Volmink said the 90-day comment period will allow civil society organisations to provide in-depth submissions, which will enhance the public participation process. “As Outa , we believe that universal health coverage is essential for the realisation of section 27 of our constitution.”

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