

NHI's new administrator hails from Durban - IOL 6 November 2019

Durban - THE future of the country's health system and the National Health Insurance (NHI) now rests in the hands of a doctor who grew up in Mobeni Heights.

Last week, Precious Malebone Matsoso stepped down as Director-General in the Department of Health to pursue her PhD studies. She was at the helm for nine years.

Anban Pillay, 50, took over in an acting capacity, making him the most senior administrator in the department.

Zweli Mkhize, as the minister, is the political head. Joe Phaahla is the deputy minister.

Pillay said: "The minister is the political head of the health department, whereas I, as the acting director-general, am the administrative head. I will handle policies and guidelines and now have to travel more frequently to Cape Town to attend Parliament."

He was schooled at Excelsior Primary and matriculated at Southlands Secondary.

Pillay said the health care offered in Chatsworth during apartheid was substandard. This prompted him to enter the health-care profession.

"It was apparent to me that change was needed and I had to be that change. Society looked after me, and it was my duty to give back."

Pillay studied pharmacy at the-then University of Natal (now University of KwaZulu-Natal) and then a medical degree at the same tertiary institution.

He completed a PhD in Health Economics in Australia.

As an intern, Pillay met his wife, Mona, while she worked as an optometrist in a clinic at the Prince Mshiyeni Memorial Hospital in uMlazi.

The couple, married for 19 years, relocated to Pretoria in 2004 when he joined the national health ministry.

Before his recent appointment, Pillay served as the deputy director-general for NHI.

He called the NHI the great equaliser.

"I knew the NHI would save lives and was necessary. Doctors take a Hippocratic Oath to treat all equally, but recently, that is just not possible. Funds, race, quality of service and medicine are barriers that prevent equality."

Pillay said, as the acting director-general, he would strive to improve the public health system because it was the foundation of the NHI.

“It is critical that quality is improved, we get more staff, equipment and access to medication for the public sector. Medical schemes are an example of inequality. People are able to choose to leave the public sector and join the private. Not everyone is that privileged.”

He said health care was fragmented in the nine provinces.

“Complications arise from the fragmentation, which could be avoided if there was a centralised national framework. Funding, planning and distribution would have greater oversight and be more controlled.”

In his spare time, Pillay enjoys running. “It helps me clear my head. I even ran a Comrades Marathon, but that was years ago, and I simply don’t have the time.”

Popo Maja, the national spokesperson for the Department of Health, said: “The process of recruiting the new director-general will start immediately. We wish Pillay well, as he holds the fort during this critical period for the department, implementing the NHI and continuing with service delivery in the health sector.”