

The coronavirus pandemic shows that South Africa's NHI will work: Mkhize –

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South Africa has done extremely well to fight against the Covid-19 surge and if South Africans continue to stay vigilant and adhere to non-pharmaceutical interventions, the country can mitigate a potentially devastating second wave, says Health minister Dr Zweli Mkhize.

In a media address on Tuesday (6 October), Mkhize said that it is now important for the country to turn its attention back towards other programmes – the most important of which is the implementation of the National Health Insurance.

“The pandemic brought home the stark realities of the shortcomings of our current system. Indeed, it crystallized the importance of the tenets of the NHI and the fact that we have actually delayed implementing a system that is absolutely crucial to enable us to respond quickly,” he said.

Mkhize said that the pandemic saw the government and private sectors immediately move to pool resources and consolidate into ‘one army, one health system with one coherent response’.

“This is the very basis of the NHI. We realised that we did not have the luxury of time to ruminate and second-guess the merits of NHI,” he said.

“We dealt with this issue truly as a South African health system. It now only remains for us to learn from this critical lesson- that it is only by pooling resources and through multi-sectoral collaboration that we can combat any attack on our national state of health.”

A legacy

In a [statement](#) last week, Mkhize said that government plans to create a ‘legacy’ for the health system from the Covid-19 pandemic.

“The legacy will find expression in the National Health Insurance. As a legacy, we have to use this pandemic to ensure that environmental health systems at implementation level are strengthened for the future.

“The national norms and standards for environmental health provides an opportunity to achieve this,” he said. Mkhize said that it is vital that employers ensure adherence to the norms and standards in rendering environmental health services.

“Adequate numbers of skilled professionals must be employed and continually developed to deal with pandemics, emerging and re-emerging diseases and current environmental challenges that may have potential negative impacts on human health.”

Mkhize has previously said that [before the pandemic struck](#), the government held many consultations where it received overwhelming support for the NHI.

“It was all about building the resilience of the healthcare sector to ensure consistent delivery of quality health care to our people. At that stage, we all agreed that any obstacles hindering collaboration between all sectors should be eliminated as we took the path to universal health coverage.”

The health minister said that the government now plans to resume its work on the NHI.

“We are all anxious to get used to Covid-19 so that we can pick up where we left off and accelerate our path towards the implementation of the National Health Insurance.

“I am convinced that we will not only prevail over Covid-19, implement the NHI and achieve Universal Health Coverage in our lifetimes, but that we will have stitched a new fabric for society – a fabric that does not compromise on alleviating poverty, preventing hunger, securing jobs and income and, overall, protecting the promise of a better life for all.”

Corruption and wasteful spending

While government is singing the praises of its Covid-19 response and highlighting its successes, the shortfalls cannot be ignored.

Most notably, how billions of rands were looted through government contracts handed out under unchecked “emergency procurement” – allegations of which are still being investigated by the Special Investigations Unit.

In September, Auditor-general (AG), Kimi Makwetu, published a report on the multi-billion rand Covid-19 relief package and how it was spent by various government departments.

After the outbreak of the coronavirus in South Africa, government announced a R500 billion package for the health response and economic distress caused by the drastic measures that had to be taken to contain the spread of the virus.

The relief package has been funded by reprioritising the 2020-21 budgets and securing loans.

On request of president Ramaphosa, Makwetu’s office undertook a real-time audit of 16 of the key Covid-19 initiatives introduced by the government, and the management of R147.4 billion of the funds made available for these initiatives.

The report noted that “pre-existing deficiencies” in the supply chain processes of government, such as corruption, were ‘amplified’ – particularly around healthcare.

“Based on what was audited to date, there are clear signs of overpricing, unfair processes, potential fraud and supply chain management legislation being sidestepped.

“In addition, delays in the delivery of personal protective equipment and quality concerns could have been avoided through better planning and management of suppliers.”

Other issues that have been highlighted include the building of healthcare facilities to deal with Covid-19 in the country, which are still under construction, and now serve no purpose since the peak of infection has passed.

