

SA will push ahead with NHI as country emerges from pandemic: Mkhize – Sowetan 15 October 2020

Health minister says it's imperative SA does not squander any gains made during the pandemic

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SA will push forward with its plan to offer equal health care for all South Africans, health minister Zweli Mkhize said at a webinar on Wednesday.

Image: Brett Eloff

Health minister Zweli Mkhize has promised an aggressive “catch-up” drive to restore community health services and persuade people to seek health care as the country emerges from the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Speaking at a webinar to mark the start of the seventh annual Rotary Family Health Day outreach programme, Mkhize said it was imperative that SA did not squander any gains made during the pandemic.

“We are aware that, due to the combination of lockdown regulations and the fear of contracting Covid-19 in [health] facilities, our people shied away from seeking what may have been deemed to be non-urgent or non-essential health services,” he said.

HIV testing dropped by 46% while countrywide screening for TB fell 9% for adults and 14% for children as fearful people stayed away from hospitals and clinics.

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Dr John Blandford, principal deputy director of the CDC's global HIV treatment, care and prevention programs

The minister also confirmed on Wednesday night that SA would move forward on the implementation of National Health Insurance.

The bill had been submitted to parliament in July 2019.

“Just as we were to begin the parliamentary hearings, a storm brewed in China with the winds blowing in our direction, forcing us to avert our gaze from those goals and attend to a global health disaster,” he said.

Mkhize said most South Africans welcomed public health reform which would ensure that everyone had equal access to medical care and which would “eliminate the current unjust two-tiered system”.

Other speakers echoed the health minister’s plea for people to seek health care, especially in the light of SA’s ongoing HIV and TB epidemics.

Dr Iain Barton of the Clinton Health Access Initiative (CHAI) said the pandemic had disrupted health-care programmes to the point that developing countries were currently “where they were 25 years ago”.

2026 deadline for NHI implementation too tight, FFC warns

Dr John Blandford, principal deputy director of the US Centers for Disease Control’s (CDC) global HIV treatment, care and prevention programmes, said the pandemic should not be a reason to hold back on HIV prevention efforts.

“We cannot allow the ripple effects to erase the hard-earned progress made on health care in SA,” he said.

Steve Letsike, deputy chairperson of the SA National Aids Council (SANAC), said it was vital that health care programmes were tailored to speak to all South Africans and not just those with “nuclear families”.

“We should never fail the marginalised communities,” she said.

Letsike also urged the government to ensure that sex workers were not left behind.

“They also have families.”

New DG of health is 'well equipped to tackle NHI & Covid-19 challenges'

The Rotary Family Health Day, which takes place once a year in nine African countries along with India and Bangladesh, have seen 2.5m people receive 11m treatments ranging from immunisations to TB screening, dental work and counselling.

SA members of Rotary International, which has some 1.2m volunteers spread across 200 countries, had contributed R30m in services during the pandemic, said Sue Paget, CEO of Rotarians for Family Health and Aids Prevention (RFHA).

Shekhar Mehta, Rotary International’s president-elect for 2021/22, said while the pandemic had brought the world to its knees — and disrupted the organisation’s health days — it also offered the chance “to rethink strategies and sharpen our axe”.

The organisation's response to the pandemic had been "outstanding", he said, adding that Rotary had given out R20m in grants, supplied millions of masks and thousands of litres of sanitisers.

Mehta pledged further help to SA and other African countries.

"I'm happy that 5% of the grants from Rotary India will come to Africa."

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