

GENERAL NEWS Summary of Highlights

Consumers retain the right to choose their pharmacy

On July 3, medical schemes' practices regarding closed Designated Service Providers (DSP) and penalty co-payments have been re-confirmed as undesirable business practices by Judge BM Ngoepe, chair of the Appeals Board.

“This appeal is part of a continuing and seemingly unending saga that has been unfolding over many years between ICPA and CMS,” states the ICPA in a media release. The Judge urged the CMS to speedily complete the process to declare the closed DSP and penalty co-payments an undesirable business practice.

“This will restore the rights of patients to not only select their healthcare professional of choice but also ensure they do not encounter any unnecessary out of pocket payments.”

* “Healthcare funders have hit back at claims by the industry regulator that they are not acting in their members' best interests during the Covid-19 pandemic,” reported *Times Live* 25 July 2020 -

In a circular on July 23, the Council for Medical Schemes (CMS) said many medical aids had not applied for exemptions to regulations that would allow them to waive contributions for members struggling to make ends meet during the lockdown. The CMS said only 19 schemes — including some of the biggest — had applied for exemptions, but those that had not done so provided cover for just over four million people.

Stressed professionals in SA are struggling

SA professionals are taking huge strain, according to the annual Stress Index, formulated each year by medical insurer Profmed, reported *Times Select* (21 September 2020) The 2020- index, which is based on surveys with professionals, mainly doctors, lawyers, accountants and engineers, found that about 37% of those surveyed are stressed out (up from just above 30% last year), but more than 70% have not sought help or support. Profmed CEO, Craig Comrie, said more than a third of respondents were medical professionals and specialists. “Fear of the unknown” had shown up as the “biggest thing” and “huge amounts of information (especially relating to COVID-19) had been shared” which had caused major anxiety among professionals as they had “tried to wade through information” to figure out what was correct and what was not, said Comrie.

Blood test heralds new era in Alzheimer's diagnosis

In August Swedish researchers reported that a new blood test may be able to diagnose Alzheimer's disease with astonishing accuracy. The test not only differentiate between Alzheimer's and other types of dementia, but also detects signs of Alzheimer's two decades before symptoms appeared in people who were genetically predisposed to develop the degenerative disease by measuring levels of a specific tau protein, called p-tau217, - *Health24* (6 August 2020).

According to Dr Michael Weiner, an Alzheimer's disease researcher at the University of California, San Francisco the test very accurately predicts who has got Alzheimer's disease in their brain, including people who seem to be normal. (Alzheimer's is an incurable disease that affects an estimated 5.8 m Americans aged 65 and older.)

Anti-vaxxers put SA at risk

An Ipsos survey among 20 000 people from 27 countries suggests 74% agreed they would agree to a COVID-19 vaccination if one were available. However, in SA one in three people would refuse to get a vaccination. According to experts this could see those in high risk groups, like the elderly, suffer most.

The country with the highest intent was China, where 97% of those surveyed, would get a vaccination.

*The SA Pharmacy Council's Nsovo Mayimele said there was "ill-informed speculation" about COVID-19 on social media but that the virus was "super infectious".

*Constitutional law expert, Paul Hoffmann, said it was ultimately up to an individual to decide whether he or she wanted to get a vaccination.

Covid-19 advanced innovation in medical and counselling worlds

"There is no doubt that the pandemic is a horror of tragic proportions, but it has taught valuable lessons and accelerated innovation that could dramatically improve the lives of millions of people," wrote Naseema Ephraim, director of client value and risk at ASI Financial Services. (*Business Day*, 7 October 2020).

Positive lessons learnt from C-19 include:

*Many medical professionals - particularly in private healthcare - adapted by offering telemedicine consultations over WhatsApp, FaceTime, Zoom or Microsoft Teams. This avoids waiting times; it enables quicker referrals to other specialists if required; and it eliminates transport time and costs.

*A counselling service, open to all South Africans, specifically to address Covid-19, but with its foundation being one of counselling. The Department of Health also started a helpline and continued to communicate frequently, releasing the latest data.

*Medical schemes created and circulated content to educate the entire population and not just their members.

*New ways of consulting with primary healthcare providers that could make both sectors more time efficient and cost-effective.

More TB cases in SA than previously thought

According to the latest WHO World TB Report about 360 000 people fell ill with TB in SA in 2019, however there is a 95% chance that the real number is in the range 250 000 to 489 000.

About 210 000 (58%) of the estimated 360 000 people with TB in 2019 were diagnosed, suggesting that around 150 000 were never diagnosed.

The WHO estimates that about 58 000 people died of TB in SA in 2019. About 36 000 of the 58 000 people thought to have died of TB were also HIV-positive. The WHO estimates that 10-m people fell ill with TB in 2019. An estimated 1.4-m people died of TB in 2019 (including people coinfecting with HIV). This means that in 2019, TB killed more people than any other single infectious agent, including HIV.