



PRIVATE PRACTICE REVIEW
NOTICE
Private Practice Review presents the reader with a summary of the most relevant breaking news in the local and global healthcare industry...

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT
Healthcare will continue to be a dilemma

Whether or not voters again back the ANC, some specific questions should provide a good gauge of progress in 2024, wrote Marcus Low in Spotlight (25 Jan 2024).

- Regarding healthcare the following questions should be asked:
Will we finally see convictions for the alleged corruption uncovered by public servant Babita Deokaran?
Will the government publish an implementation plan for addressing our healthcare worker crisis (we already have a good strategy) and, this is the key, put money and political capital behind its implementation?
Will the new Parliament pass a good State Liability Bill (which could help reduce the state's liability for medico-legal claims) and finally get around to amending South Africa's Patents Act to better balance medicine monopolies with the right to health (as set out in a policy adopted by Cabinet back in 2018)?
Will establishing the National Public Health Institute of South Africa remain stalled?
Will the government continue to ignore recommendations from the Competition Commission's Health Market Inquiry on how to better regulate private healthcare in South Africa (the commission's very impressive report was published in 2019)?
Will the new health MECs and heads of provincial health departments, appointed after the elections, bring real change?

Whatever happens at the ballot box, one thing is clear: Given the rising NCD threat, healthcare worker shortages, budget shortfalls, and endemic corruption, whoever is in power nationally and provincially after this year's elections, will have their work cut out for them.

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Bloomberg reported on 2 February that Pres Ramaphosa is likely to sign the NHI Bill before this year's national election. The Bill has to be signed before Election Day so that full implementation can occur under the new administration.

NEWS FROM GOVERNMENT
Solidarity requests Pres Ramaphosa to waive the NHI Bill

The trade union Solidarity presented an urgent protest to Pres. Cyril Ramaphosa questioning the legality of the NHI Bill and requesting him to seriously reconsider the Bill, according a media statement (30 January 2024).

Apparently procedures were not followed correctly during the voting processes on the Bill in the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces.

The protest is addressed to the president on behalf of members, the community and the wider public. Solidarity believes that the NHI Bill should be considered "illegal" because the correct procedures that apply to the submission of financial laws have been disregarded.

The NHI Bill is a financial bill as it makes tax proposals. According to the Constitution, it should therefore have been submitted to Parliament by the Treasury and the Minister of Finance. However, this process was not followed and the legislative process is therefore invalid," says Theuns du Buisson, economic researcher at the Solidarity Research Institute (SRI).

Solidarity appealed to Ramaphosa to waive the bill and instead improve the existing public healthcare system in South Africa as a matter of urgency."

Joburg still waiting for pathology lab

After missing three deadlines, the new Johannesburg Forensic Pathology Service (FPS) laboratory has still not opened its doors, reported News24 (17 Jan 2024).

The R588m state-of-the-art facility was meant to open at the Helen Joseph Hospital grounds in November 2019. This date was moved to May 2022 and then to January 2023 - and there's still no sign of it opening.

It was initially meant to replace the Hillbrow Forensic Pathology Mortuary, but the project was expanded to include an academic forensic laboratory centre with a 650-person storage facility with auditoriums, workspace, and observation rooms for police, medical professionals and students."

Shortfall, a global issue

According to predictions by the World Health Organisation (WHO) a global shortfall of 10m health workers can be expected by 2030, primarily in lower-income countries.

Meanwhile, SA's struggle to address its shortage is further compounded by healthcare professionals seeking opportunities abroad, reported City Press (28 Jan 2024).

While there are no precise statistics on the number of healthcare professionals leaving, a 2019 study tracked the career paths of 497 medical students, revealing that 6.8% had emigrated. The government's efforts to ensure equal access to quality and affordable healthcare through the NH have also contributed to this trend."

Unemployed junior doctors survive on locum positions

City Press reported on 28 January that the shortage of permanent jobs in the healthcare sector is forcing unemployed junior doctors in SA to rely on locum positions (filling in for other doctors absent due to illness or vacation).

These medical professionals are not only dealing with unemployment, but also facing challenges such as insufficient training, imbalanced staffing levels, ageing infrastructure, inadequate medical supplies, and challenging working conditions.

The South African Medical Association Trade Union has called for urgent placement of doctors and medical interns who have completed their community service. However, the Department of Health has not yet provided solutions to address these challenges."

Health Department requests 'concrete data'

The National Department of Health (NDH) requested concrete data to verify a claim by South African Medical Association Trade Union (SAMATU) that there are 800 unemployed doctors, reported Daily Maverick (24 Jan 2024).

This follows a list from the SA Medical Association (SAMA) reflecting that less than 400 doctors claim to be unemployed. Obtaining sufficient budgets, given the country's current financial problems, is the main challenge facing provincial departments of health, according to the NDH.

What happened to the money?

According to a spokesperson for the Cancer Alliance (CA) no information is available regarding the outcome of a critical oncology tender issued in 2023 by the Gauteng Department of Health - Daily Maverick (26 Jan 2024).

A spokesperson for the CA said: "Many oncology service providers could not attend a mandatory briefing session due to communication issues. As a result, they were excluded from tender applications."

Although R784m was allocated to the department to address the surgical and radiation oncology services backlog, concerns arose in June 2023 due to the limited progress.

The backlog in the province includes around 3,000 patients awaiting potentially life-saving radiation treatment at hospitals like Charlotte Maxeke Johannesburg Academic Hospital and Steve Biko Academic Hospital."

Hospital without functioning CT scanners for 3 weeks

Critical issues with CT scanners at the Dr George Mukhari Academic Hospital have resulted in delayed treatment, inadequate care, and even patient deaths. - Daily Maverick (29 Jan 2024). For nearly three weeks, the hospital had no functioning CT scanners.

The hospital management did not renew maintenance and warranty contracts for the scanners, making it difficult to repair or replace them promptly.

Despite efforts to negotiate contracts and address the issues, the hospital's management has been slow to act, with patients suffering as a result. The situation has reached a critical point, with people actively dying due to the lack of functional CT scanners and an inefficient image archiving system at the hospital."

FINANCIAL NEWS
Clicks reports record sales during festive season

Wellness retailer Clicks announced nearly a 12% growth in interim retail sales, thanks to its stores expanding their market presence across essential product categories, reported News24 (23 Jan 2023).

This was attributed to Clicks' increased sales during the festive season.

The company disclosed an 11.8% increase in retail sales during the first 20 weeks of its 2024 fiscal year. The only drawback was the performance of its medicine distribution business, LFD, which saw a 6.3% decrease in total managed turnover and a 0.8% decline in wholesale turnover.

PHARMACEUTICAL NEWS
WHO addresses scarcity of antivenom in Africa

Bloomberg reported on 24 January that up to 32 000 people in sub-Saharan Africa annually lose their lives to snakebites, due to the limited availability of antivenom. To address this problem the World Health Organisation (WHO) adopted a more targeted approach to antivenoms.

The new guidelines focus on four categories of antivenoms, including the broad-spectrum variety. The region's primary antivenom producer is South African Vaccine Producers, based in Johannesburg.

GENERAL NEWS
Neuralink implants brain chip in human

Reuters reported on 30 January that the brain-chip startup Neuralink, founded by Elon Musk, has successfully implanted its first human patient with its brain-computer interface (BCI) implant.

The implant, called 'Telepathy', aims to enable individuals to control computer cursors or keyboards using their thoughts.

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) granted clearance for Neuralink to conduct this human trial, a significant milestone for the company's efforts to assist patients with paralysis and neurological conditions."

SA leads HIV/Aids vaccine research
Malaria vaccine for children
Cholera vaccination campaign

The South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) is spearheading a new scientific research initiative on the African continent to develop an HIV/AIDS vaccine, reported Mail & Guardian (24 Jan 2024). The consortium comprises prominent South African scientists and leading scientists from Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Mozambique.

The consortium is financially supported by the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief."

Cameroon is launching a malaria vaccination campaign aiming to vaccinate 250,000 children over the next two years, reported Associated Press (30 Jan 2024). The project will be supported by the Gavi Vaccines Alliance, which is also assisting 20 other African countries.

Africa witnesses about 250m malaria cases annually, resulting in 600,000 deaths, primarily among young children. Cameroon will use the Mosquirix malaria vaccine, endorsed by the World Health Organisation."

NEWS FROM MEDICAL SCHEMES
'NHI won't get the job done'

As the NHI Bill stands, it would signal a profound seismic shift in the very fabric of South Africa's healthcare dynamics, wrote Craig Comrie, chairman of the Health Funders Association, in The Citizen (25 Jan 2024).

Currently, people who belong to medical schemes are removing the obligation from the state to fund their healthcare needs while still contributing taxes to fund public health services.

Nationalising healthcare funding, as proposed under the NHI Bill, is risky, as removing private funding diminishes opportunities for retaining specialist skills, general infrastructure investment and the development and long-term management of health resources.

Alternative models that would allow the improvement of public health facilities with combined public and private funding and proposals of partnerships to improve the quality of the public health system while reducing costs to those with medical scheme membership have been discussed."

More patients opt for cheaper schemes and gap cover

As many members of medical schemes are growing older, while younger and healthier members opt for more affordable plans with reduced benefits, the cost of gap cover can exceed half of the total medical scheme payouts for certain patients," wrote Chris Bateman in Financial Mail (1 Feb 2024).

As a result, the healthcare insurance industry is struggling to manage rising costs.

Dr Simon Strachan, CEO of the South African Private Practitioners Forum (SAPPF), expressed concerns about the Health Market Inquiry's recommendation that a regulated tariff ceiling should be implemented as it might limit competitiveness in the market and pose challenges for universal health coverage (NHI). Strachan is sceptical about the impact of NHI on medical schemes, suggesting that it may not significantly affect them for at least two decades. He believes the current system needs to better represent and compensate teamwork within multidisciplinary healthcare teams.

Angelo Coetzee, former chair of the South African Medical Association (SAMA), advised individuals to carefully review the terms and conditions of their gap policies. She warned that the trend of patients opting for cheaper medical scheme options could lead to reduced access to healthcare and increased costs."

CMS CIRCULARS
Circulars published by the CMS in January 2024

Circular 1 of 2024: Iron Deficiency Anaemia as a PMB condition

SPECIAL NOTES
Psychiatric Practice available immediately (PE)

Established private practice available in Port Elizabeth following the psychiatrist's retirement after 30 years. No charge involved. Offices available for rental in South End, Port Elizabeth, close to all hospitals.

For more info, contact: Dr Taylor at 022 704 1650 Email: tat@caid.co.za

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