

Reports of a project of the Government Employees Medical Scheme to supply five months' worth of 'Multivitamins' at once to its more than two million beneficiaries appear to point to an illegitimate arrangement that should be investigated.

The Council for Medical Schemes is obliged to conduct an inspection into the relevant transactions that gave rise to these unregistered 'benefits', to determine whether there is any evidence that the Board of Trustees and the scheme management, together with GEMS' service providers, have contravened the relevant statutes in the governance and management of the scheme.

Individual assessments of GEMS members have not taken place and, consequently, contra-indications, to the use of these vitamin products have not been determined and could result in physical harm. Moreover, adverse events and dangerous drug interactions between the vitamin products and other medications members may be using may occur in unsupervised users.

A medical scheme may only provide benefits in accordance with the registered rules of the scheme, which must be consistent with the Act. Only registered medical practitioners and pharmacists may dispense any scheduled medication. The dispensing of any medicine is individualised to a patient, contingent upon the pharmacist or doctor's evaluation. It is not possible for a medical scheme and its managed care administrators to supplant this function.

In the event and the available evidence, the CMS should move swiftly to initiate procedures to suspend the trustees and the management and to place the scheme in administration in order to protect the members of the scheme and its assets.

The Health Professionals Council of SA (HPCSA), as well as the SA Pharmacy Council, should also convene an enquiry into the obvious breach of the ethical rules of medical practice by those health professionals in GEMS and among its various service providers and, if found in breach of their ethical obligations, take the relevant disciplinary measures against them.

We have it on good authority that the GEMS Board of Trustees and the management were warned by the professions that the distribution of these vitamins was "unscientific" and outside the scheme rules registered with the Council for Medical Schemes. It appears to have ignored these warnings and proceeded regardless.

The warnings also included that the cost to the scheme, i.e., to member funds, was also much higher than the price at which patients could acquire these vitamins. GEMS was also warned that the project will result in abuse and wastage and in most cases storage of these products for five months in the SA environment would result in the degradation of the products.

From the published reports there appears to be no rationale, medically or in terms of the Medical Schemes Act and the scheme's own rules, for the project. That would indicate that this may have been an attempt to improperly utilise member funds and the SA Police Services and, if warranted, the SIU, should investigate these allegations.