

Universal Healthcare Access for South Africa

MEDIA STATEMENT

Healthcare access in South Africa

– a consensus proposal on a set of achievable strategic healthcare reforms to enable the constitutional entitlement for universal access to all necessary healthcare for all who live in South Africa

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NEW HEALTHCARE REFORM FRAMEWORK PROPOSES EQUITABLE, EFFICIENT AND SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS FOR SOUTH AFRICA

The Universal Healthcare Access Coalition (UHAC), which represents the majority of healthcare professional associations, has unveiled a reform framework to address South Africa's critical healthcare challenges. This consensus-driven proposal outlines practical solutions to improve access, equity, and quality in the country's healthcare system while ensuring financial sustainability.

South Africa's healthcare system faces deep systemic challenges:

- **Public Sector:** Governance failures, inefficient resource allocation, and declining service quality undermine public healthcare.
- **Private Sector:** Rising costs and regulatory gaps in medical schemes limit access and sustainability.

Recognising these challenges, the UHAC has proposed a three-pronged approach that emphasises governance reform, equity and efficiency.

The need for these proposals arises from a 20-year policy vacuum that has seen nearly all strategic health reform at a standstill. While it could be argued that the NHI proposals fill this gap, the UHAC has assessed the NHI as fiscally and institutionally unimplementable. In particular, there is no feasible scenario in which a single tax-financed fund can provide all the coverage for the entire population of South Africa.

Consequently, South Africa faces the bleak prospect of a continued policy vacuum resulting in further declines in the performance of both the public and private health systems. Instead, consistent with health system approaches across the world, South Africa can only provide

universal access and coverage through a combination of tax-financing and private contributions. But to achieve this, government must establish governance frameworks consistent with this objective in both the public and private systems.

This report has also been submitted to the President following his [invitation for workable proposals](#) and is now published for wider consideration and public engagement.

THE THREE KEY FEATURES OF THE REFORM FRAMEWORK

[Note that this is only a high-level summary. The complete set of proposals are provided in the [report](#).]

1. **Separation of Pooling and Purchasing Functions:** To enhance accountability and equity, the framework separates the pooling of funds, namely the essential system of income and risk-related cross-subsidies (found in government tax-funded allocations and insurance), from the procurement of healthcare services (purchasing). Pooling will occur nationally to ensure fair resource distribution, while purchasing will be decentralised for more efficient, localised decision-making. This applies to both the public and private health systems.
2. **Strengthening Public Healthcare Services:**
 - Retain healthcare as a provincial competency with a revised governance framework.
 - Establish autonomous district health authorities and public hospitals with independent corporate governance structures.
 - Decentralise operational decisions, supervised by independent corporate governance structures - including workforce planning and procurement, to improve service delivery.
 - Establish a governance framework needs to be established for strategic workforce planning and implementation.

- Establish a comprehensive approach for access to and coverage of critical care services.

3. Expanding the Contributory System:

- Strengthen the system of contributory coverage (medical schemes) to maximise the mobilisation of resources for the health system and to prioritise the deployment of tax revenues for lower-income households.
- Introduce mandatory medical scheme coverage for higher-income groups, with risk equalisation and social reinsurance implemented for medical schemes to establish system-wide risk pooling.
- Implement a publicly sponsored medical scheme to compete with private schemes to modify incentives to direct them towards the management the cost and quality of coverage.
- Implement an income-related basic contribution subsidy for medical scheme members (replacing the existing tax credit), which can be designed to prioritise lower income contributors, including the missing middle and those in post-retirement.
- Mandate standardised and transparent benefit packages to eliminate discriminatory practices in medical schemes.
- Institutionalise incentives to manage the cost and quality of healthcare through the system of pooling (mandatory benefits, risk equalisation and social reinsurance).

GOVERNANCE REFORMS

The report underscores the importance of depoliticising healthcare governance by separating political oversight from the administration and management of healthcare organisations. Independent supervisory boards and an appointments authority will ensure competent and accountable leadership.

FISCAL SUSTAINABILITY

The framework prioritises financial sustainability by:

- Relying on contributory systems to reduce the strain on tax revenues.
- Allocating public resources to benefit low-income households.
- Phasing reforms to ensure scalability and minimal disruption.

REGIONAL INTEGRATION

The UHAC calls for the government to initiate a regional discussion to establish a financing framework for regional governments to fund the costs of their citizens' usage of South Africa's public health services.

THE WAY FORWARD

The UHAC calls for inclusive, trust-based collaboration among government, stakeholders, and civil society to drive these reforms. The phased approach ensures that changes are implemented incrementally, minimising disruptions and building a more integrated and responsive healthcare system over time.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

The UHAC's proposed reforms offer a pragmatic pathway to achieving universal healthcare access in South Africa. By addressing governance failures, integrating public and private systems, and ensuring financial sustainability, the framework aims to uphold the constitutional right to healthcare for all who live in South Africans.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION OR TO REQUEST INTERVIEWS, PLEASE CONTACT:

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ABOUT THE UHAC

The Universal Healthcare Access Coalition (UHAC) represents a collaboration of national healthcare organisations and healthcare professionals. The coalition is committed to fostering strategic dialogue and actionable solutions for South Africa's healthcare system, ensuring quality, accessibility, and equity for all.

SIGNATORIES

South African Medical Association

Progressive Health Forum

South African Private Practitioners Forum

Radiological Society of South Africa

South African Society of Anaesthesiologists

South African Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists

South African Orthopaedic Association

South African Dental Association

ENT Society of South Africa

Emergency Medicine Society of South Africa

South African Speech and Language Association

Association of Plastic Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons of South Africa

Faculty of Consulting Physicians of South Africa

South African Urological Association

National Pathology Group

Ophthalmological Society of South Africa

Paediatrician Management Group

Psychiatry Management Group

Surgicom

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