

Scheme member ignorance a problem

Ignorance among the majority of the country's medical aid scheme members with regard to key aspects of their benefit packages still represents a huge logistical and costly problem for members, providers and schemes alike.

Accepting that most schemes make attempts to keep their members informed with regular mailings and in some instances, their own magazines, delegates to the recent MxHealth Quarterly Review debate in Sandton in mid-August were told it was still very much a case of "you can take a horse to water but can't make it drink".

Board of Healthcare Funders (BHF) CEO, Dr Humphrey Zokufa, stressed that patients should be incentivised to make sensible and cost-beneficial decisions and get over the simplistic "medical aid will pay" syndrome.

"Take the case of a branded medicine at R500 and a generic at R100. If the medical aid is going to pay in any event, what's the incentive to go the least costly route?"

Doctors bear the brunt...

Medical practitioners are still not convinced that so-called managed health care tools and systems benefit either themselves or their patients.

"While doctors are becoming more aware of the need for cost containment in the provision of healthcare, their obligation to the patient is still, as it should be, focused on clinical outcomes," SA Medical Association (SAMA) communications officer, Magda Naude, said during the MxHealth Quarterly Review debate.

She also made the point that the burden of having to explain managed healthcare measures to patients invariably "landed in the lap" of the doctor: "Unfortunately this happens with patients who suddenly realised that they cannot claim benefits for certain procedures due to scheme applied managed care rules. Such instances take non-clinical time for the doctor cannot claim!"

It was felt, therefore, that schemes should liaise with both the specialist and GP groups when defining their options and benefits to assist with clinical decision-making on appropriate treatment options.

Distributor invests R100 million

International Healthcare Distributors (IHD), the 13-year-old multi-corporate pharmaceutical distributor now representing 22 manufacturers and 40% of the distribution market, has announced a R100 million investment in a second distribution centre in the Johannesburg area.

Feature of the new centre, currently nearing completion in the Longmeadow industrial suburb to the northeast of the city, will be a 2 129m² cold room to facilitate uninterrupted cold chain maintenance in terms of receiving, storage and despatch.

IHD already has centres in Cape Town, Durban, Bloemfontein and Port Elizabeth, and expects to move R9 billion worth of products this year alone.

Toronto trash trail...

In an immediate response to a Business Day comment on the South African exhibition stand at the International AIDS Conference in Toronto, Canada, in mid August – an editorial said to have "misrepresented the process of setting up the stand" – Health Minister Dr Manto Tshabala-Msimang intimated in a press statement dated August 16 that one of the reasons garlic, lemons and beetroot represented the main exhibits was that "procurement of a large stock of highly scheduled medicines like antiretroviral drugs and keeping them in an open hall that is frequented by thousands of people, is illegal".

"The only alternative available was to place a few packs of antiretroviral drugs, which were made available by some of the people living HIV in the government delegation," the minister explained.

She went on to defend the primary exhibits with the following explanation: "Garlic has anti-bacterial and anti-fungal properties and it is good in dealing with trash - one of the common problems that people living HIV and AIDS have to grapple with. Lemon is a good source of vitamin C while beetroot helps with anaemia.

"As proud Africans," she continued, "we reported that we are supporting research and development of African traditional medicines that are effective in alleviating symptoms associated with HIV and AIDS by boosting the immune system."

Later that day, August 16, the stand was reportedly "trashed" by representatives of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) group...

Afforded unconditional accreditation

Metropolitan Health Group (MHG) has become the country's largest medical scheme administrator to receive unconditional accreditation by the Council of Medical Schemes (CMS).

The council recently embarked on a process of evaluating all of South Africa's medical scheme administrators to ensure that they have systems and processes in place in order to deliver a high standard of service to its clients.

There were some 300 specific conditions that needed to be met, most of which centred on complex administration systems.