

## **ANC spins a scheme to sell public health plan**

*Party wants controversial national system to be in place by 2012*

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### **SURVEY SHOWS SA IS READY FOR NHI**

SOUTH Africans are warming up to the proposed National Health Insurance (NHI) scheme, according to a household survey. The survey, conducted across the country and published in the latest South African Medical Journal, shows that two-thirds (67%) of all respondents "would join a publicly supported health insurance scheme if monthly contributions were less than for current medical schemes". Among current members of medical schemes, 71% backed the NHI. "A wide range of stakeholders agree that the most urgent first step towards an NHI is to improve public sector health services," the study found. The University of Cape Town's **Health Economics Unit** and the Centre for Health Policy at Wits University conducted the survey in May and June last year. Five randomly selected households were interviewed in 960 areas across all nine provinces, bringing the total sample size to 4 800 respondents. Its aims were to explore public perceptions of the key changes necessary to ensure the NHI's acceptability and whether the country was ready for the system. Government hopes the NHI will "transform the health system into an integrated, prepayment-based health financing system".

THE ANC will undertake a charm offensive to sell the national health insurance scheme to the public in the face of opposition from the private health sector. A popular campaign will promote the proposed National Health Insurance (NHI) plan, an internal draft policy proposal reveals. Among the activities planned is the use of all available platforms to advance the NHI, including next year's wage bargaining season as well as sessions of the National Economic Development and Labour Council (Nedlac) and the SA National Aids Council. The ANC has put in place a high profile NHI campaign committee to lead its battle to table a policy that is likely to be as controversial here as US President Barack Obama's efforts at health reform are proving to be in the US. It includes members of all the alliance partners, including civics, unions and communists.

Taking a leaf from its successful election campaign model, the ANC will flood ordinary communities with pamphlets explaining the health scheme's benefits. The committee will be made up of the ANC's organising and mobilising, media and communication, policy institute and political education and training sections, according to a memorandum sent to party secretary-general Gwede Mantashe by Bandile Masuku, co-ordinator of the ANC national executive committee's education and health sub-committee. The NHI plan was adopted as policy at the ruling party's epic Polokwane congress in 2007, and the ANC set itself five years to "realise the resolution of implementing" the system, which suggests it will be in place by 2012.

The ANC document says the NHI will be effective in collecting revenue, better able to negotiate prices and will offer government a higher degree of control over health expenditure. The health plan will be funded through general taxation and mandatory payroll contributions collected by the SA Revenue Service. Other funding sources include the Road

Accident Fund and the Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Fund.  
"Funding of the health sector from general tax revenue should be significantly increased," the ANC document suggests. No one will be allowed to opt out of the NHI.

Also on the cards, according to the ANC document, is the elimination of current tax deductions for medical scheme contributions and the channelling of these funds to the NHI. Writing in this week's SACP online journal, Umsebenzi, party general secretary Blade Nzimande said: ".The scheme's aim is to ensure that no South African must be expected to make an upfront payment for health services, whether in the public or the private healthcare sector." Nzimande wrote that "those who have resources must subsidise those who do not.

"Where necessary, we shall also be calling marches and demonstrations to expose the greed of capitalist health institutions, and mobilising our people to roll back the market in the provision of health care," he wrote. Nzimande vowed to convene thousands of red forums in communities and workplaces to discuss the NHI and ensure it was properly understood as part of this year's Red October campaign. At its congress last month Cosatu promised a centralised campaign to defend the proposed NHI.

- LOYISO SIDIMBA