**R50billion budget demands meticulous planning, application and scrutiny**

KwaZulu-Natal’s (KZN) Health budget of R50.687 billion - 34.7% of the provincial budget - may sound plausible and sufficient to the uninformed ear. It is a considerable amount of revenue to dispose of in a year and given its magnitude, it deserves meticulous planning, informed application and close scrutiny. It must however be viewed in the context of the 10.4 million people who inhabit our province along with the socio-economic realities that they face. Of great significance is the inescapable fact that approximately 90% of citizens are medically uninsured. This places Universal Health Care at a high level of priority and justifies a large slice of the provincial pie to keep our people healthy. Quality of life is inextricably linked to the state of one’s health.

***The state of Health***

The state of health within KZN’s Department of Health (DOH) can be assessed by two indicators - patient-waiting-times and medico-legal-claims arising from bad experiences which both demand improved administrative and management processes. The department plans to roll out e-Health to 42 out of 70 hospitals by the end of the 2023/24 financial year. This is not a new commitment and the DA ventures to say that the roll-out ought to be 70 out of 70.

What does a cost/benefit analysis tell us of the impact that slow implementation will have on ever-growing medico legal claims facing this department? In layman’s terms, spending a little on improved administration may save a great deal on curtailing of negligence claims. Every hospital and clinic requires an effective system of record keeping and administration. Doing this will pay off through reduced waiting times, and hence improved citizen experiences, along with the possibility of reduced negligence claims.

***NHI red herrings***

On the subject of National Health Insurance (NHI), the DoH plans to employ 19 more General Practitioners (GP’s) from the NHI Grant. This is a red herring. It takes the absolute necessity to employ doctors within a Public Health Service, and attributes it to a scheme that is yet to be tested for its financial viability and pragmatic application.

Regardless of the label, name or term that one attaches to the employment of doctors, it remains an essential requirement in any health system. So, rather than attempting to extol the virtues of NHI, the ANC government should focus on the quality of service that citizens receive and the optimal use of limited resources to deliver those services. Grandiose schemes that ultimately seek to gain control over funds that sticky fingers can’t reach should be rejected in favour of doing better with what we have.

Given the propensity for looting – as revealed by the Zondo Commission - there is no longer any trust for a regime that has fostered astronomical increases in the personal wealth of a select and connected few, while claiming to represent the poor. There is a canyon-sized disconnect between them and the champagne and caviar comrades who claim to champion the cause of disadvantaged citizens.

***Ballooning medico-legal claims***

The DoH growing contingent liability of medico-legal claims - in the region of more than R20 billion - must be addressed. The existence of critical vacant budgeted posts is an indictment on this ANC-run government’s leadership. A critical vacant post is just that – it is needed. Filling it requires an immediate and urgent response. With Compensation of Employees (CoE) at approximately 62 % of expenditure and downward pressure on revenues, any failure to fill funded vacancies is tantamount to negligence. It also raises the obvious question about the impact vacancies may have on circumstances leading to such claims.

***EMS may need to be rescued***

The DA’s assessment of the DoH operations has left an uneasy feeling that Emergency Medical Services (EMS) is in danger of becoming the forgotten stepchild. In practical terms - how do you get access to the DoH Universal Healthcare Services if you are physically incapable of doing so due to an injury, condition or circumstances. Given the statistic that 90% of KZN’s do not enjoy private healthcare services (or are uninsured), the need for emergency medical services must be recognized for the “essential services” status it has been given. Due to its nature and reach, this service needs a high level of management and monitoring.

The 2022/23 budget review states that 200 ambulances would be available by the end of March this year. They must service the 90% of 10.4 million citizens over the vast expanses of our province. Flat tyres, inadequate supplies, empty tanks, broken parts and vacant posts may in fact put EMS in need of rescue itself.

***Alternative energy sources***

Load-shedding has hit our economy like a wrecking ball, laying waste to businesses and jobs. The DoH provides an essential service that sustains the quality of life for the majority of KZN citizens. The department has felt the cold winds of energy insecurity and faces the harsh realities of energy interruptions due to the other reality of a captured energy entity. The practical difficulties with load-shedding exemptions implies that alternative sources of energy are essential equipment for many facilities. The DoH must begin the process of adjusting its operations to the requirement of the Just Energy Transition we are embarking upon as a nation. This cannot wait.