

The future of healthcare is now

By [Lerato Mbsiah](#)

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Medical schemes in South Africa are facing a watershed moment with the imminent threat to their future role and overall existence under the National Health Insurance (NHI). By contrast, the prospect of a new age of technology will drive competition, based on efficiencies, value and innovation for the benefit of patients.



Lerato Mbsiah, CEO: Health Funders Association

The Health Market Inquiry's recommendations will pave the way towards a patient-centred, value-based healthcare regime. Patients whose doctors are empowered with good quality information have better outcomes and unnecessary healthcare expenditure is reduced.

In 2020, the reforms promised by the regulator to provide a framework for a low-cost benefit option (LCBO) which would address some of the inequities in healthcare in the country, may also materialise. The current legislation makes medical scheme contributions unaffordable for many people. Schemes are ready and waiting to introduce low-cost options that would enable four-million more South Africans to have access to private sector cover, thus relieving an enormous burden on the state sector.

The new age of healthcare

Technology will be a key driver to improving access to more efficient medical care and enhancing treatment efficacy in the coming decade. While the digital era promises to drastically improve operational efficiency and patient outcomes, these innovations can often be costly and may have a negative impact on the economics of healthcare including in the health funding industry. On the other hand, there are great opportunities for efficiencies through better coordination of care and digital health strategies.

Innovations, ranging from artificial intelligence, robotics, machine vision, genomics and precision medicine, will change the healthcare landscape in the next 10 years.

In South Africa, where a quadruple burden of disease puts severe pressure on healthcare budgets, telemedicine can be a saviour in delivering healthcare to underserved communities and these capabilities are continuously being enhanced by new innovations and developments. The National Department of Health has successfully rolled out several large-scale tech-driven initiatives. One of these, MomConnect, uses mobile technology to provide information on pregnancy and childbirth. Once the baby has been delivered, the information provided changes to that of caring for a newborn.

Genomics will be another gamechanger in the coming years and will help in determining personalisation of treatment plans and medicines. In the treatment of cancer, DNA sequencing technology has enabled the development of therapies to treat particular mutations of genes. She adds that immunotherapy, which reprogrammes the patient's own immune cells to attack the cancer cells, will also rise to the fore of personalised cancer treatment in the near future.

The power of data

The optimal use of data and analytics will enable healthcare leaders to precisely analyse patients and use that information to proactively improve affordability, treatment and health outcomes. Cloud-based data management and exchange will be the norm in the next few years.

A growing patient-centred approach will give rise to health information exchanges (HIEs), which enable data, like a patient's medical history, from multiple databases to be exchanged through a single digital hub. This will have significant advantages for all players in the healthcare chain, but mostly for the patient through eliminating duplicate diagnostic tests, better outcomes and cost reduction. The protection of sensitive and private personal data is a critical aspect of implementing any digital health solution.

The internet of things

The internet of things (IoT) has given rise to tech-savvy consumers of healthcare who have come to expect paperless, real-time engagement with their medical schemes using digital health technology innovations such as wearable tech, mobile apps and the like.

The health technology explosion will not only enhance medical care but also alter the entire healthcare experience for both the health professional and the patient. Consumers are the disruptors of the industry. The quest for quality, personalised care by consumers will prompt both funders and providers of healthcare to transform their reimbursement criteria and service offerings in pursuit of value-based care.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lerato Mbsiah is the CEO of the Health Funders Association (HFA) an industry body representing the country's largest schemes and administrators.