



FOR PROFESSIONALS

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Hospices must be incorporated into NHI - 11 May 2012

Hospices are often both an underrated and underfunded segment of the healthcare industry, despite the invaluable service that they provide. As a result, it is important that hospices are not only adequately funded but also given the recognition for the work that they do.

According to Graham Anderson, Principal Officer at Profmed, the medical scheme that caters exclusively for graduate professionals, with the government currently embarking on an overhaul of the healthcare sector in South Africa via the National Health Insurance initiative, it is crucial that hospices are also incorporated into this new model. "Our healthcare system is undergoing one of the biggest changes in its history and this provides a perfect opportunity to bring hospices further into the framework by setting up formal relationships between hospitals and hospices and providing increased training for the home-based carers that hospices provide to families."

"The issue of funding poses a significant challenge for hospices around the world, not just in South Africa. The funding of healthcare remains a contentious issue in countries such as the UK and US, and hospices are often among the last institutions to receive funding. As a result, they remain heavily reliant on donor funding and fundraising efforts. It is no surprise that the same is true in South Africa."

He says, however, that while they provide an essential service all over the world, hospices are particularly important in a country such as South Africa that has a high prevalence of diseases such as HIV and AIDS, with little support for those suffering. "Hospices are a crucial part of the South Africa healthcare industry, as they provide palliative care – the relieving and preventing of suffering – to terminally ill patients compared with the acute care – active but short-term treatment – that is provided by acute hospitals."

Anderson says the problem is that very few people in need of such a service will ever gain access to it. According to a report on Palliative Care published by the Democratic Alliance in 2009, it is estimated that a maximum of 5% of people who die from terminal illnesses in South Africa have access to adequate palliative care.

"It should be remembered that hospices are not just buildings that provide somewhere for the terminally ill to stay in their last days; they also provide care and support to people in their own homes by sending out nurses who visit patients and their families to ensure any medication is being taken and that the family is coping. However, the resources they have to provide are already stretched."

He says that as there are no state-funded hospices, these institutions rely solely on grants to continue the work that they do. "While the government does provide some level of funding, this is nowhere near sufficient to enable them to meet the needs of everyone who would require this kind of service."

"It is very important for people to have somewhere to go, either to obtain support or to have somewhere to die with dignity. The work that hospices and their staff do is essential and the people that work within them perform a wonderful job, so it is crucial that more support is provided," concludes Anderson.