

# Reimagining dental care funding in South Africa: A call for equitable healthcare

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## INTRODUCTION

Dentistry, often perceived as an ancillary branch of healthcare, is in reality a critical pillar in the overall health and wellbeing of individuals. The integral role of dental care extends beyond the prevention and treatment of oral diseases; it significantly impacts systemic health, quality of life and socioeconomic productivity. Despite its importance, dental care frequently receives inadequate attention in terms of subsidies and government funding, resulting in substantial disparities in access and outcomes.

In South Africa, the challenge of underfunded dental care is compounded by a healthcare system that has historically favoured curative over preventive services, often sidelining oral health in the process. Current funding models, heavily reliant on out-of-pocket payments and private insurance, fail to adequately cover much of the population, leaving many without necessary dental care. This systemic neglect not only exacerbates oral health issues but also places a greater burden on the overall healthcare system due to the interlinked nature of oral and general health.

As South Africa stands on the cusp of a transformative shift in its healthcare landscape with the implementation of the National Health Insurance (NHI) Act, there lies a significant opportunity to readdress and restructure the funding mechanisms for dental care. The NHI aims to provide universal health coverage, ensuring that all South Africans, irrespective of their socioeconomic status, have access to comprehensive healthcare services. This editorial seeks to explore the implications of the NHI for dental care, emphasising the necessity for equitable funding and the critical role of dental health in achieving holistic health outcomes.

In this piece I aim to highlight the urgent need for a more inclusive and well-funded approach to dental care within the broader framework of national healthcare reform. By integrating dental care into the NHI and ensuring adequate funding, South Africa can take a monumental step towards a more equitable and efficient healthcare system that recognises and values the importance of oral health.

## THE CURRENT STATE OF DENTAL CARE FUNDING

### Analysis of existing funding models

In South Africa, the funding for dental care is primarily characterised by a heavy reliance on out-of-pocket payments and private insurance schemes. The public healthcare system, which serves the majority of the population, is significantly underfunded and overstretched, resulting in limited access to dental services. According to the Council for Medical Schemes, only a small proportion of the population is covered by private medical aids that offer

comprehensive dental benefits, leaving a large segment of the population to either pay out-of-pocket or forgo necessary dental care altogether.

## IMPACT OF INSUFFICIENT SUBSIDIES AND GOVERNMENT FUNDING ON DENTAL CARE ACCESS

The perceived lack of adequate government funding for dental care has profound implications for public health. Inadequate subsidies mean that public dental services are often limited to emergency care, with preventive and restorative services being significantly underprovided. This neglect results in higher incidences of dental diseases, which could otherwise be mitigated through timely and preventive care. The disparity is evident when comparing dental care to other healthcare services, which tend to receive more substantial funding and resources. For instance, chronic conditions and hospital-based care receive priority funding, often at the expense of preventive dental services.

### Comparison with funding in other healthcare sectors

When examining funding allocations, it becomes apparent that dental care is disproportionately neglected compared to other healthcare sectors. The NHI's proposed funding model aims to address this imbalance by integrating dental services into the broader healthcare funding pool. Currently, the fragmented funding model not only undermines the efficiency of dental care delivery but also exacerbates health inequities. For example, under the existing system, general healthcare services are more robustly funded through various government schemes and private insurance coverage, while dental care often remains a secondary consideration. This systemic issue is further compounded by the lack of specific policies aimed at enhancing dental health, unlike other sectors which benefit from dedicated programmes and substantial investments.

The current funding model for dental care in South Africa is inadequate and inequitable, leaving many without access to necessary dental services. By addressing these funding disparities and integrating dental care more comprehensively within the NHI framework, South Africa can move towards a more balanced and fair healthcare system.

## NATIONAL HEALTH INSURANCE (NHI) AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

### Overview of the NHI legislation and its objectives

The National Health Insurance (NHI) Act, signed into law by President Cyril Ramaphosa on May 15 2024, marks a pivotal shift in South Africa's healthcare landscape. The primary objective of the NHI is to ensure universal health coverage, providing all South Africans with access to quality healthcare services regardless of their socioeconomic status. The NHI aims to address the significant inequalities

in the current healthcare system, which disproportionately favours those with access to private healthcare while the majority rely on an underfunded public system.

#### Detailed explanation of how NHI aims to provide universal healthcare

Under the NHI, funding for healthcare will be centralised into a single pool managed by the NHI Fund. This fund will be financed through a combination of general revenue allocations, payroll taxes and surcharges on taxable income. The NHI model is designed to eliminate out-of-pocket payments at the point of service, ensuring that healthcare is delivered free of charge to the most vulnerable populations. This approach aims to pool risks and resources, enabling cross-subsidisation where the healthy and wealthy subsidise the care of the sick and poor, thereby ensuring equitable access to healthcare services.

#### Specific provisions related to dental care under NHI

The NHI framework explicitly includes dental care as part of its comprehensive healthcare coverage. This integration is crucial given the historical neglect of dental services in public healthcare funding. By incorporating dental care into the NHI, the government aims to enhance access to preventive, restorative and emergency dental services. This move is expected to reduce the prevalence of untreated dental conditions, which are often linked to more severe health issues, thereby improving overall public health outcomes. The NHI Fund will contract both public and private dental care providers, ensuring a broad network of services available to all citizens.

#### Further considerations

While the NHI presents significant opportunities for improving dental care funding, it also faces substantial challenges. The successful integration of dental care into the NHI will require robust infrastructure, effective governance and efficient allocation of resources. There is a need for clear guidelines and policies to ensure that dental care providers are adequately compensated and that services are delivered efficiently. Moreover, there is an opportunity to leverage the strengths of both public and private sectors, fostering collaboration that can lead to better service delivery and health outcomes.

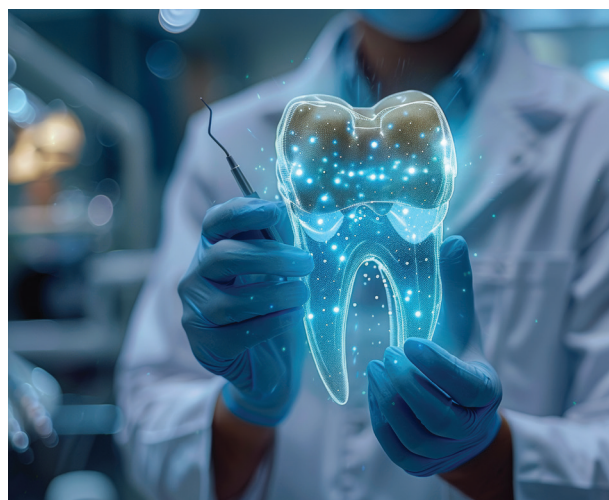
The National Health Insurance Act represents a transformative step towards achieving equitable healthcare in South Africa. By incorporating dental care into the NHI, the government acknowledges the critical role of oral health in overall wellbeing and aims to address longstanding disparities in healthcare funding.

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

#### Potential challenges in integrating dental care into the NHI framework

The integration of dental care into the NHI framework presents several challenges that need to be carefully navigated to ensure successful implementation. One of the primary challenges is the existing disparity in infrastructure and resource availability between urban and rural areas. Rural areas, which are often underserved, may face significant hurdles in accessing the improved dental care promised by the NHI due to limited facilities and healthcare professionals. Addressing these disparities will require substantial investment in infrastructure and incentives to attract dental professionals to underserved areas.

Another challenge lies in the administrative and operational capacities of the NHI Fund. Effective management of



a centralised healthcare fund that incorporates diverse services, including dental care, necessitates robust governance structures, transparent processes and efficient allocation of resources. There is also the risk of corruption and mismanagement, which has historically plagued various public sectors in South Africa. Implementing stringent oversight mechanisms and leveraging technology for transparency and efficiency will be crucial in mitigating these risks.

#### Opportunities for improving dental care through NHI funding

Despite the challenges, the NHI framework offers significant opportunities to transform dental care in South Africa. One of the most promising aspects is the potential for increased access to comprehensive dental services. By removing financial barriers, the NHI can ensure that preventive, restorative and emergency dental care is accessible to all South Africans, regardless of their socioeconomic status. This increased access is expected to lead to better oral health outcomes and, by extension, improved overall health.

The NHI also provides an opportunity to standardise the quality of dental care across the country. By establishing national standards and guidelines for dental services, the NHI can ensure that all providers, whether in the public or private sector, adhere to the same high standards of care. This standardisation can help reduce disparities in service quality and ensure that all patients receive the best possible care.

Moreover, the NHI's emphasis on preventive care aligns well with the needs of dental health. Preventive dental care, such as regular check-ups, cleanings and early treatment of dental issues, can significantly reduce the incidence of more severe and costly dental problems in the future. By funding and prioritising preventive dental services, the NHI can contribute to a healthier population and reduce the overall burden on the healthcare system.

#### Case studies or examples from other countries with similar healthcare models

Examining international case studies provides valuable insights into how South Africa can navigate the integration of dental care into its NHI framework. Countries such as the UK and Australia, which have implemented universal health coverage models that include dental care, offer useful lessons. For instance, the UK's National Health Service (NHS) provides a model for integrating dental services into

a comprehensive health system, demonstrating the importance of adequate funding, effective management and continuous evaluation to ensure service quality and accessibility.

Australia's Medicare system also includes dental services, primarily for children and disadvantaged adults, highlighting the benefits of targeted funding and the importance of preventive care. These international examples underscore the need for South Africa to tailor its NHI implementation to local conditions while learning from the successes and challenges experienced by other countries.

The NHI presents a historic opportunity to redefine dental care funding and delivery in South Africa. By addressing the challenges and leveraging the opportunities presented by the NHI, South Africa can ensure that dental care is no longer a neglected aspect of healthcare but an integral part of a comprehensive and equitable health system.

## THE ROLE OF DENTAL CARE IN OVERALL HEALTH

### The interconnectedness of dental health and general health

Dental health is intricately connected to overall health, impacting various systemic conditions and influencing overall quality of life. Poor oral health is associated with numerous chronic diseases, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, respiratory infections and adverse pregnancy outcomes. For example, periodontal disease has been linked to an increased risk of heart disease and stroke. The bacteria and inflammation associated with periodontal disease can enter the bloodstream, contributing to the development, or negatively influencing, these serious conditions.

Moreover, untreated dental issues such as caries and periodontal diseases can lead to severe pain, infections and tooth loss, which in turn affect nutrition, speech and self-esteem. The inability to chew food properly due to dental problems can result in poor nutrition and gastrointestinal issues, highlighting the far-reaching implications of oral health on overall wellbeing. In children, dental health is crucial for proper development, learning and social interactions. Poor oral health in childhood can lead to missed school days and reduced academic performance, further emphasising the need for comprehensive dental care.

### Evidence-based arguments on why dental care should be a priority

The evidence supporting the prioritisation of dental care within healthcare systems is robust. Studies have shown that preventive dental care can significantly reduce the incidence and severity of oral diseases, leading to better health outcomes and lower healthcare costs. For instance, regular dental check-ups and cleanings can prevent the progression of dental decay and gum disease, avoiding the need for more expensive and invasive treatments later on.

Integrating dental care into broader healthcare initiatives also supports the early detection of systemic conditions. Dentists are often the first to notice signs of systemic diseases such as diabetes, which can manifest as oral symptoms such as dry mouth, gum inflammation and slow healing of oral tissues. By prioritising dental care, healthcare systems can leverage this early detection capability, improving the management and outcomes of systemic diseases.

### Call to action for policymakers and stakeholders

Given the substantial evidence linking oral health to overall health, it is imperative for policymakers and stakeholders to prioritise dental care within the healthcare system. The integration of dental services into the NHI framework is a critical step towards

achieving this goal. Adequate funding, effective implementation and continuous evaluation are essential to ensure that dental care is accessible, affordable and of high quality for all South Africans.

Policymakers should also focus on public health initiatives that promote oral health education and preventive care. Increasing public awareness about the importance of oral hygiene, regular dental check-ups and healthy dietary habits can significantly reduce the burden of dental diseases. Collaboration between dental professionals, healthcare providers and community organisations is crucial in implementing these initiatives effectively.

Dental health is an integral component of overall health, influencing various systemic conditions and significantly impacting quality of life. The NHI presents an unprecedented opportunity to prioritise dental care within South Africa's healthcare system, ensuring that all citizens have access to comprehensive and preventive dental services. By recognising the interconnectedness of oral and general health and committing to equitable funding and resource allocation, South Africa can achieve significant improvements in public health outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

The journey toward equitable healthcare in South Africa is at a pivotal juncture with the implementation of the NHI. This bold initiative embodies a commitment to universal health coverage, promising to bridge the longstanding disparities that have plagued our healthcare system. Dental care, often sidelined in funding and policy discussions, must be recognised as a vital component of this transformative vision.

As this editorial has explored, dental health is not an isolated facet of wellbeing but a foundational element that intersects with various systemic health outcomes. The neglect of dental care exacerbates chronic diseases, undermines overall health and perpetuates socioeconomic inequities. The NHI offers a historic opportunity to rectify these oversights by ensuring comprehensive dental services are accessible to all, regardless of economic status.

However, the realisation of this vision demands more than legislative change; it requires a collective commitment to reimagining and restructuring our healthcare priorities. Policymakers, healthcare providers and the broader community must collaborate to build a robust, integrated healthcare system where dental care is not an afterthought but a priority. This entails adequate funding, strategic resource allocation and an unwavering focus on preventive care and public health education.

The potential for the NHI to transform the healthcare landscape is immense, but it will only be realised through diligent implementation and continuous evaluation. We must learn from international models, adapt their best practices to our unique context, and remain vigilant against the pitfalls of mismanagement and corruption.

In conclusion, as South Africa embarks on this ambitious journey, let us seize the opportunity to redefine our healthcare system. By prioritising dental care within the NHI framework, we can foster a healthier, more equitable society where every individual's right to comprehensive healthcare is upheld. The integration of dental services into the NHI is not just a policy adjustment; it is a profound affirmation of the value we place on the health and dignity of every South African.

This moment calls for visionary leadership and a steadfast commitment to health equity.