



NHI – keeping pace with what is happening



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In dynamic healthcare environments rapid changes and challenges are a reality. South Africa is facing the decision of introducing national health insurance (NHI). Apart from keeping an ear to the ground by attending conferences, networking and listening to debates, there are many ways to note what has been reported and what is happening in the field. There are opinions, counter-opinions, feelings, emotions, and

research results to be noted. Stakeholders in a country facing decisions on NHI should note what is happening in the country as well as experiences from abroad. “On-the-ground-developments”, opinions and research findings may all support such decision-making.

Considering the issue of national health insurance, there is much to consider e.g. experiences from other countries that are reported in the subject literature, research reports and conference papers (e.g. the experiences of France, Taiwan, Korea, Israel and the United States), progress and opinions in the South African context, and changes, decisions and opinions in different sectors of the South African healthcare context. This includes what is happening with the Department of Health and the variety of South African medical schemes, new developments in supporting health technology, consumer awareness, and opinions on NHI.

Although no individual would be able to pick up on all new information and happenings that might be relevant to taking decisions on NHI in South Africa, healthcare professionals and the healthcare sector can work together in monitoring information in the field. It would actually have been very useful if a centralised alerting service (also called “current awareness services” in the context of Library and Information Science) could be provided e.g. by means of RSS feeds, e-mail alerts, blogs and twitter. Each of these can play a role in alerting services. Only a very few will, however, be addressed in this article.

When monitoring new information on NHI, there are e.g. the following that need to be considered:

- published literature such as scholarly articles or peer-reviewed opinion papers, research reports and books (reflecting research results and experiences)
- newspaper clippings
- decisions, legislation, announcements, regulations, etc. to be noted
- services and implementations
- opinions (health sector as well as consumers)

The following are a few examples of resources that might be worth monitoring. This is not intended as an exhaustive

list – merely an indication of possibilities that might be followed up and expanded.

1. **Journals publishing on various issues of national health insurance** - Due to the diversity of fields that are affected by NHI (e.g. ethics, the effect on the labour market, dental services, and diseases such as diabetes mellitus), articles are published in a diversity of journals. Journal titles that more frequently feature articles on NHI include Health Affairs, International Journal of Health Planning and Management, Health Economics, BMC Health Services Journal, New England Journal of Medicine, Health Policy, Health Policy and Planning, and the American Journal of Public Health. Their tables of content can be monitored for free through e-mail alerts or by RSS feeds and for some, such as the South African Medical Journal the full-text articles may also be available. (RSS is an acronym for Rich Site Summary, an XML format for distributing news headlines on the Web, also known as Really Simple Syndication.) The full-text of articles might be found through Google Scholar and open access repositories, on interlibrary lending through the services of a library, or by purchasing the article (perhaps a last resort since such articles are often quite expensive).
2. **Databases** - In addition to monitoring the latest editions of journals, databases can be monitored for all new publications on national health insurance and related issues. PUBMED is available for free. On the advance search screen (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/advanced>), the phrase “national health insurance” can be searched in the title field or any of the fields related to MeSH headings to ensure that only highly relevant publications on the topic is picked-up as they are added to the database. The search is then saved to ensure that an email alert is received every time relevant publications are added to the database. There might also be other databases worth monitoring that may be available for free. Although a commercial information service provider, ScienceDirect (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/>) offers free guest access to allow you to do a very basic search and saving the search to receive regular updates. When searching in the “all fields” option “national health insurance” should be in quotes to ensure that highly relevant publications are found.
3. **Newspapers and news services** - There are a number of services that offer email alerts and RSS feeds that from time to time report on national health insurance e.g. Mail & Guardian Online (<http://www.mg.co.za/>), the SABC News section (<http://www.sabcnews.com/portal/site/SABCNews/rssfeed?forum=rss>), Health-e (http://www.health-e.org.za/health/category_list.php?uid=73) and News24.com (<http://www.news24.com>). There are also numerous other national and

- international news services that might be monitored.
- Monitoring specific stakeholders in the South African health sector** - There are many stakeholders that may report on health insurance policy, e.g. the South African Medical Research Council (<http://www.mrc.ac.za/home.htm>), the Board of Healthcare Funders of Southern Africa (<http://www.bhfglobal.com/headlines>), Council for Medical Schemes (<http://www.medicalschemes.com/publications/publications.aspx?catid=23>), publishers such as HSRC (<http://www.hsrcpress.ac.za/product.php?productid=2240>), Department of Health (<http://www.doh.gov.za/mediaroom/index.html>), Hospital Association of South Africa (<http://www.hasa.co.za/news/detail/40/>), South African Medical Device Industry (<http://www.samed.org.za/>), individual medical schemes, and the South African Medical Association (http://www.samedical.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=169&Itemid=330) (provides access to a number of South African journals in the medical field, but with no alerts). Unfortunately a number of the above do not seem to have a service for e-mail alerts or RSS feeds.
 - Fee-based information services** - There are also

information service providers that can be paid for an alerting service on national health insurance e.g. SAMedia and other products of the local SABINET (<http://www.sabinet.co.za>).

- Search engine alerts** - Another, perhaps more time consuming option is the use of alerting services offered by e.g. Google Alert (<http://www.google.co.za/alerts?hl=en>). There are options for specifying the type and scope of search required e.g. comprehensive, blogs, videos, etc, and whether you want to be notified daily, as it happen or weekly.

The time required to use services mentioned here, and to set up search profiles should not be underestimated. The question, however, is that if the healthcare sector combine resources and expertise in identifying resources to monitor and making it available to all (apart from where people are perhaps in direct competition), would it benefit the decisions that South Africa will take on NHI, its implementation and maintenance – and would it be worthwhile to explore with these options?

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