



FOR PROFESSIONALS
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ADEQUATE FUNDING ESSENTIAL TO SUSTAINABILITY OF DENTAL PROFESSION IN SA - SURVEY

23 July 2013: According to the 2014 Q1 PPS Graduate Professionals Confidence Index (PCI) the confidence levels within the dental profession about the economic outlook for South Africa (SA) are at an all-time low. Of the 111 respondents, only 47% indicated that they were confident about the economic outlook of SA, which has steadily and consistently slipped over the past two years from 59%.

Maretha Smit, Chief Executive Officer at the South African Dental Association (SADA), believes that this is as a result of the increasingly bleak outlook for the private health sector in South Africa, particularly in light of the Sections 36-40 of the National Health Act, dealing with the Certificate of Need, which was recently been enacted with little warning within the health sector.

Pointing to the results of the survey, Smit also notes that dentists' confidence levels about having saved enough to retire comfortably are also of major concern. The study found that of those interviewed, only 51% indicated that they were able to achieve a comfortable retirement – dropping four percentage points from the same quarter two years ago. “Again, this is reflective of the mood in the dental industry and the fact that there is no confidence in the sustainability of dentistry in the context of developments in the health sector.”

Gerhard Joubert, Executive Head: Group Marketing & Stakeholder Relations at PPS, says that the results of the survey are particularly concerning and are showing a gradual decline in the confidence levels within the profession. “It is vital that a proactive approach is taken between all stakeholders within the profession, including the Department of Health and the various medical schemes, to find a solution to ensure the sustainability of the profession. Key to addressing these issues is identifying alternative funding mechanisms within the dental sector.”

Smit adds that while confidence within the dental profession is low, there is a noticeable trend of this dipping even lower in the first quarter of the year – often as a result of many dentists still generating income from the limited funds available in medical aid schemes for dentistry. “The results from the survey are showing a steady decline year-on-year. This is significant, as the results seem to indicate that they are getting increasingly disillusioned with the funding available to dentistry – with medical schemes not providing adequate dental cover.”

She says that medical schemes typically provide for dental benefits from the “day-to-day” or “savings” accounts, i.e. there is no separate dental benefit that is paid from the risk portion of the scheme. “Given the other health funding alternatives that need to be funded from this portion, scheme members often neglect their oral health and choose not to visit the dentist.”

“In addition, the medical aid rates for dental benefits are grossly insufficient in order to provide for the extensive overheads in dental practices – especially in context of the fact that the dental equipment and consumables are mostly imported and subject to the exchange rate fluctuations. For instance, a dental consultation is funded by schemes at a lower rate compared to a doctor’s consultation, however, the doctor doesn’t have similar overheads to the dentist,” Smit adds.

As part of the resolve, she adds that it is imperative that medical schemes should either acknowledge and rectify the inequity in the current tariffs, or should communicate more effectively with their scheme members as to the shortfalls of their plans in terms of dental benefits. “Patients should be made aware that, in most instances, a co-payment will need to be applied for dental procedures.”

Smit believes that until such time as a resolution is made, alternative funding mechanisms for dentistry in South Africa is necessary. “An example of one of these solutions is separate dental insurance, which is one of the only options to facilitate access to dental care for consumers.”

“Dentistry is an essential part of the health industry in the country, so it is important that these concerns are addressed in order to retain the profession within South Africa. We remain positive that workable solutions can be created to achieve this,” concludes Joubert.