



POLICY MONITORING AND RESEARCH CENTRE

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH, COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL SERVICES

**“The Growing Demand for Specialised Medical Treatment by
Patients Abroad: Challenges and Opportunities for Health”**

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I. The adequacy of the policy and legal framework governing specialised medical treatments abroad;

Zambia has an inadequate policy and legal framework governing specialised medical treatment abroad, this is evident from the National Health Policy which states that Zambia does not have an effective mechanism to engage in and implement global health issues as the efforts are fragmented between various line ministries and are uncoordinated. The 7th National Development plan also does state to some extent, Governments intention on governing specialised medical treatment abroad as shows from the extract below.

10.3.2 Strategy 2: Expand capacity to increase access to quality health care

During the Plan period, access to quality health care will be enhanced. Efforts will be made to improve distribution of health facilities at all levels and to enhance the capacity of healthcare personnel and supply of essential drugs and medical supplies. Focus will be placed on building the health system to ensure equitable access to essential medical products, vaccines and technologies of assured quality, safety, efficacy and cost-effectiveness. Local production of medicines and generic drugs will also be promoted to reduce cost and improve access to health care. Investments will also be made in building a well-performing health workforce that will be fairly distributed, competent, responsive and productive. Investment in areas lacking health infrastructure will be prioritised. To improve financial access to health services and improve resource availability, alternative health care financing arrangements will be implemented. Given that reduction of maternal mortality is a key health sector objective, there will be increased attention to increasing proportion of skilled attended deliveries and where pregnancy complications occur, there will be need to enhance access to emergency obstetric care services.

Programmes:

- a) Infrastructure, equipment and transport improvement;
- b) Medical commodities supply improvement;
- c) Health care financing improvement; and
- d) Health service delivery enhancement.

II. The reasons why Zambians are seeking specialised treatments abroad

Lack of adequate infrastructure for certain treatments and diagnosis

The health care sector over the years has modernized in order to meet the increasing demand for specialist health care and treatment. Unfortunately, the modernization of health infrastructure in Zambia has been slow in comparison to other countries such as South Africa and India that have been among the most frequently visited countries for specialist care. Given the high demand for timely and quality diagnostic and treatment services, Zambia is unable to meet the demand for specialized treatment due to a lack of adequate equipment and infrastructure hence the need to travel out for these services.

According to the Zambia Health Sector Profile of 2013, approximately 150 patients require and seek specialist treatment from countries such as South Africa, United Kingdom, India and the United States of America annually. It is also reported that the Government and individual citizens spend not less than USD\$10,000 per treatment which is very costly on the government and is vital investment that Zambia loses out on through treatments abroad. Also, poor maintenance of infrastructure leads to a lack of confidence by citizens in the quality of treatment local health facilities can offer. Similarly, laboratories are critical to diagnosis however, these services tend to be limited due to a shortage of adequate inputs and maintenance necessary for them to function effectively. This calls for more investment in the modernization of government facilities at provincial level in order to reduce the pressure placed on the University Teaching Hospital to attend to complex medical conditions across the country.

Lack of adequate specialized medical personnel

Recently Zambia has been faced with a sudden rise in non-communicable diseases such as Cancer, cardiac, diabetes and renal diseases. These diseases have posed new challenges for Zambia's health sector whose service delivery is predominantly public. The lack of adequate equipment and specialized medical personnel poses a threat to quality health service delivery and access for many Zambians that may require these services. Also, public health facilities tend to lack the capacity to handle such cases and are often referred to the University Teaching Hospital for specialist care who are equally overwhelmed and in some cases under-equipped to handle certain complications. Hence, some patients may opt to access these services abroad so as to avoid the long waiting time before the necessary treatment is available. In the same vein, Zambia has a large human resource turn over in the medical field. Many medical personnel trained in Zambia and abroad opt to seek employment in the diaspora due to the financial benefits it can offer, this leads to understaffing and low skills retention within the sector.

III. The criteria of selection for patients seeking specialised medical treatments abroad

Cost of Medical Treatment

Although highly unlikely considering the prevailing economic conditions, the Cost of the Medical Treatment should be an important consideration in deciding whether certain medical treatment should be sought for abroad. A complex medical procedure would, for example, be more costly locally because of its complexity and scarcity as compared to the cost of undertaking the same procedure abroad where it is done more often. A cost benefit factor will, therefore, have to be undertaken before a decision can be made.

Quality of Medical Treatment

Apart from the cost of medical care, the quality of the same medical care should also be of paramount importance. Quality of medical treatment is especially focused on Technical Quality which, in the healthcare industry is technical equipment and other related medical diagnoses systems are core for patients' check-up for their treatment. The technical quality should be a prime objective because the proper treatment of patients largely depends upon the proper diagnoses of diseases.

Treatment Types and Availability

The type of treatment that is being sought by a patient is also one of the criterion that should be considered in deciding whether to seek treatment abroad. When dealing with this aspect, regard is usually given to more rare procedures such as cosmetic surgery and replacement surgeries among others.

Lack of Access to a Particular Treatment

This consideration is usually coupled with the above on the availability of treatment. Access to a particular treatment also forces the patients to outsource medical treatment abroad. For example, Zambia currently lacks treatment concerned with sex change, stem cell or cytoplasmic transfer therapy. In Zambia, the lack of access to a particular treatment is largely due to the lack of technology.

IV. The mode of financing specialised medical treatments abroad

The main sources of health care financing in Zambia are, government budget appropriations, earmarked donor funding through the national treasury, health sector basket under the SWAPs, donor support to specific projects and activities, and household health expenditure, through user fees.

Revenue contribution and collection

Financing for the health sector flows primarily through the GRZ, with external donors providing significant on- and off-budget support. External resources provide 34% of total resources for health. GRZ financing for the health sector is provided by general tax and budget support, with no designated revenue stream.

Pooling

The Social Health Insurance scheme aims to cover all Zambians under a single designated funding pool. The first phase of implementation will reach an estimated 4.5 million Zambians, focusing on formal sector employees and their dependents, and vulnerable populations. The second phase will extend coverage to the general population, bringing more than 11 million people in the informal sector under the scheme. Of the small portion of the population (including dependents) covered by Private Health Insurance, almost all receive coverage through their employers. Hospital-based insurance schemes provide an additional source of risk pooling.

Purchasing

Health services in the public sector are provided by the Ministry of Health (MOH) and Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, with the latter managing level one and two facilities (health posts and rural and urban health centers), and MOH managing level three, four, and five facilities (district, provincial, and tertiary hospitals).

HIV Financing

Funding for HIV totalled an estimated US\$532 million in 2015, with external sources contributing more than 75% of available funds. However, estimated total HIV and AIDS expenditure (TAE) was just US\$409 million, highlighting the low execution and utilization of available HIV and health sector funds. With an estimated 1,177,614 people living with HIV (PLHIV), TAE in Zambia per PLHIV was US\$347, of which an estimated US\$79 came from domestic sources.

V. The contribution of the private sector in providing specialised treatment

The Ministry of health regards Public Private Partnerships (PPP) as a potential tool that would quicken development of hi-tech infrastructure in the health sector and accelerate the establishment of health services that are frequently sought in foreign health facilities.

Zambia and all the neighbouring countries except South Africa do not have hospital centres of excellence to treat cases requiring specialized treatment, and lack specialist diagnostic and treatment centres to treat cardio-vascular, liver, renal and cancer diseases. It is for this reason that PPPs play a huge role in filling the gaps that the country's health sector face.

Zambia lacks specialist diagnostic and treatment centres to treat cardio-vascular, liver, renal and cancer diseases. Consequently, over 150 patients each year require and seek for treatment of these diseases in foreign health facilities in South Africa, United Kingdom, India and United States of America where the Government of Zambia and private Zambian individuals spend not less than USD \$10,000 per treatment.

PPPs cut on these costs that are related with treatment in foreign Health facilities, as they contribute towards developing health facilities that could provide specialist medical diagnostic and treatment in the following areas; Cardiology, Radiotherapy, Neurology, Urology, Traumatology, Nephrology & Dialysis Diabetology, Dermatology, Physiotherapy, Key hole surgery, Stem Cell Therapy and Other surgical interventions

Zambia has a very limited number of laboratories dotted around the country in hospital premises. However, these fail to meet national and international standards due to lack of basic inputs and maintenance. PPPs

investments contribute towards the construction and rehabilitation of medical laboratories, Procurement of standard laboratory equipment and in house maintenance of existing equipment as well as promotion of research in laboratory services.

PPPs investment contributes towards human resource development in the health sector they significantly contribute to increasing numbers of qualified health personnel in health institutions and offset the effects of the brain drain in the health sector.

VI. The challenges facing the government in providing specialised treatment in public hospitals

Inadequate financing

The budget allocation in the health sector has been increasing over the years with the current standing at K9.4 billion which represents 8.8% of the total budget. This comprises of a budget breakdown of K900 million for drugs and medical supplies, K600 million for hospital operations and K1.5 billion for health infrastructure projects. According to the Abuja Declaration of 2001, governments committed to 15% of the total budget towards the health sector and Zambia falls below target. Furthermore, the medical field has modernized and technical and specialist equipment is costly. The government is limited in the number of equipment it can purchase across various facilities in the country. This in-turn affects the quality of services and the type of services government facilities can render to the public. Similarly, Zambia still grapples with infectious diseases such as Malaria, HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and many others as well as a high maternal mortality rate that also requires interventions and funding by the government, consequently reducing the financing for specialist care in public facilities.

Inadequate staffing

Zambia has a high staff turn over with many medical personnel seeking employment opportunities in the diaspora. Also, there are very few local medical training facilities that train doctors in specialized fields of medicine to meet the growing demand for quality specialized medical care. This results in a high doctor-patient ratio and increases the waiting time before specialized diagnosis and treatment can be accessed. Given the large number of nursing schools and graduates rolled out each year, the government is not capable of integrating them into the labour force. The current fiscal constraints on the government poses a challenge in reducing the patient-nurse ratio and the quality of care patients can access given the scope of work and longer working hours nurses face due to inadequate staffing in government clinics and hospitals. Other reasons that lead to understaffing and low productivity in government health facilities include; unattractive conditions of service, low pay and lack of incentives, poor working conditions, lack of adequate facilities, supplies and equipment, and inadequate opportunities for career development. There is a need to adequately finance the health sector in order to increase the opportunities for personal and professional development as a way of motivating medical personnel. Similarly, equipping them with the necessary skills and specialized training could have a direct impact on their productivity and attitude towards service provision in public hospitals.

Inadequate infrastructure

Zambia is yet to develop modern health infrastructure in order to meet the growing demand for specialized medical services across the country. However, this development has been slow with referrals to critical medical cases still being referred to the University Teaching Hospital. There is a need to adequately equip hospitals across the country in order to decongest the UTH and also reduce the amount of time it takes before one can access specialist care in government hospitals. Likewise, equipping hospitals with the relevant equipment and facilities has been a challenge for the government given the fiscal constraints it is faced with. Public hospitals generally rely on government funding for their operations and this limits their capacity to meet the needs of the public.

VII. Strategies that the Government has put in place to reduce on the demand for patients seeking specialised medical treatment abroad

The 7NDP highlights Health as one of the top priority which will be regarded as a key economic investment that will contribute to the evolution of the human capital to drive the nations socio-economic development agenda. As a strategy to achieve this, emphasis has been placed on strengthening health systems and services using the primary health care approach, to enhance the wellbeing of all Zambians. Government intends to re-engineer the health service model to emphasise, in this particular order: health promotion, disease prevention and curative and rehabilitative services in close-to-client settings.

Efforts will be made to improve distribution of health facilities at all levels and to enhance the capacity of healthcare personnel and supply of essential drugs and medical supplies. Focus will be placed on building the health system to ensure equitable access to essential medical products, vaccines and technologies of assured quality, safety, efficacy and cost-effectiveness. Local production of medicines and generic drugs will also be promoted to reduce cost of and improve access to quality health care. Investments will also be made in building a well-performing health workforce that will be fairly distributed, competent, responsive and productive. Investment in areas lacking health infrastructure will be prioritised. To improve financial access to health services and improve resource availability, alternative health care financing arrangements will be implemented. Given that reduction of maternal mortality is a key health sector objective, there will be increased attention to increasing proportion of skilled attended deliveries and where pregnancy complications occur, there will be need to enhance access to emergency obstetric care services.

Recommend the way forward

In view of improving the health sector in Zambia, PMRC recommends the following;

1. There is need for skills transfer through exchange programs with countries that have modernized specialist care in order to capacitate medical personnel.
2. Government should increase financial allocation towards modern infrastructure and medical equipment to enhance Zambia's capacity to meet the growing demand for specialist care.
3. Government should put in place measures on preventative interventions so as to cut on costs as opposed to curative interventions.
4. There is need for Government to provide better incentives and improved working conditions in government facilities in order to retain specialized medical personnel.
5. Increasing the budget allocation in the health sector which currently stands at 8.8% to meet the 15% threshold set by the Abuja Declaration.