

# Backing for NHI concept

South Africa's decision to implement the National Health Insurance has been endorsed by global health economists in a landmark report released in London on Tuesday, 3 December 2013.

The Lancet's Global Health 2035, written by top economists including US President Barack Obama's former economic advisor Larry Summers, detailed how countries could best invest money to deliver better health.

The report found the "returns on investing in health are impressive".

It also found that extra years lived by citizens and increased gains in productivity accounted for massive economic growth. It predicted returns nine times the investment on health.

The report was commissioned as a follow-up to the 1993 World Development Report described as a "catalyst in global health". The previous report was the reason behind Bill Gates's decision to donate billions of dollars towards fighting HIV, TB and malaria.

Gates said then: "Every page screamed out that human life was not being valued in the world."

The latest report promotes the idea that the world should move towards universal health coverage by increasing free access to high-quality health to the poor.

One of the report's authors, vice-president of the African Development Bank, Mthuli Ncube, said yesterday: "Its message supports [the] NHI."

The report also supports the taxation of unhealthy foods, cigarettes and alcohol as one of the cheapest ways to achieve reduction in lifestyle diseases, which are becoming a global epidemic. This is something Health Minister Aaron Motsoaledi has often promoted.

National Treasury chief director of health and social development, Dr Mark Blecher, said these interventions were promoted as "best buys" or cost-effective ways to improve health.

Summers said: "Now, for the first time in human history, we are on the verge of being able to achieve a milestone for humanity: eliminating major health inequalities, particularly inequalities in maternal and child health.

"The powerful drugs and vaccines now available make reaching this milestone affordable."

The report found that health gains in the past 20 years were unprecedented in the history of mankind. They include developments such as:

- Between 2000 and 2011, 24% of growth in low-income and middle-income countries was as a result of extra life expectancy of population;
- Deaths in children under the age of five fell from 12 million to 6.9million between 1990 and 2010; and
- At least 43 new products for infectious diseases caused by poverty have been registered for the next decade.

Source: The Times

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