

Parliamentary Budget Vote Debate 16
Portfolio Committee on Health
By
Hon. SJ Nkomo, MP

National Assembly: 5 May 2015

Honourable Chairperson

This debate occurs during a watershed moment for health in South Africa as there is currently a Bill of momentous import before the National Assembly's, Portfolio Committee on Health.

The Medical Innovation Bill introduced by IFP's Dr Mario Oriani-Ambrosini, MP, and after his passing, re-introduced by IFP Chief Whip in Parliament, Mr Narend Singh, MP, seeks to create a legislative space, namely, for the express purpose and object of Medical Innovation in cases where conventional treatment of illness is not effective; so that with the informed consent of the patient, other alternative medicines and treatments may be applied and which includes the use of medicinal cannabis, which is but one of many possible innovative alternatives.

The Bill is not just about cannabis though, the Bill is about the alternative medical treatment and relief from suffering for thousands of South Africans who would otherwise have no other option but to go home and die; being failed by current standards of medicine.

The Bill seeks to give hope to those who have been told by western medicine, "I'm sorry there is nothing more we can do for you", and will allow government through the Department of Health to take a crucial and bold step towards innovative medical treatment and palliative care.

More importantly, through this Bill such care will be available to all South Africans not just the wealthy and those with comprehensive medical aid schemes, as is now the case, especially when talking in terms of Cancer and its related and prohibitively costly, chemotherapy treatments.

In a recent Departmental Briefing on this Bill, this portfolio committee was advised by Department of Health officials that cannabis is available for medical prescription through certain applications regulated by the Medicines and Related Substances Act. We have received expert medical opinion on this issue and are advised that this is not the case as Cannabis is currently scheduled as a schedule 7 substance by the Medicines Control Council which expressly prevents and makes it inaccessible for medical prescription, even by a section 21 application. We seek clarity on this issue from the Hon Minister.

In conclusion and brief summation, this Bill's passing into legislation is of vital importance and we urge the Minister, the members of the Portfolio Committee on Health and this government to use this opportunity for medical innovation and to develop regulations that will ensure the rational control of cannabis and other substances for medicinal purposes, whilst maintaining the flexibility to encourage on-going research and development of a greater medicinal arsenal which will ultimately be of benefit to all South Africans.

The IFP supports this budget vote.

I thank you.