

Specialist Services Critical to the Provision of High Quality, Cost-effective Patient Care

The ever-increasing use of managed care programmes by medical schemes, combined with the growing ease with which untrained individuals can access and use technology, has led to a dangerous trend of downplaying the role of the medical specialist in modern patient care.

Dr Tony Harrison, chairman of the National Pathology Group (NPG), said there is a false assumption in many quarters that a generalist can provide the same kind of input, analysis and diagnosis that a specialist can.

Pathology is one speciality whose ability to add value is undermined by this trend.

“Modern society, with its demands for instant gratification, is rather taken with the notion of short cut pathology testing in the doctor’s room. The long-

term implications for patient care are extremely disturbing,” said Harrison.

A cornerstone of managed care is the introduction of a “gatekeeper” to prevent abuse or over-use of medical services - ideally the family doctor. However, attaching mini-laboratories to general medical practices undermines this principle.

“Internationally, health authorities have expressed concern that physician self referral of clinical laboratory services encourages excessive ordering and inappropriate utilization of laboratory tests, given the inherent conflict of interest in ownership, reward and the use of apparatus requiring significant capital input,” said Harrison.

He noted that the majority of NPG laboratories were accredited by the South African National Accreditation

Service (SANAS), in an ongoing process, thus complying with international standards.*

However, Harrison said that the gravest dangers of managed care practises that bypassed specialist input or restricted the use of laboratory testing were to the health of the patient. “Early diagnosis facilitates improved patient treatment, care and recovery,” he said.

Restricting access to specialist services can actually increase a medical scheme’s costs long-term. The American Society for Clinical Laboratory Science has noted that “... unqualified testing personnel unnecessarily increase the cost of healthcare through errors in testing, repeat testing, false diagnosis due to false-positive test results, and undiagnosed conditions due to false-negative test results”.