

THE BULLETIN

A National HealthCare Group Publication



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Dare mighty things

“Dare mighty things” — a quote from US President Teddy Roosevelt — is a timeless phrase. Recently, with the landing of NASA’s Perseverance rover on Mars, it was revealed that the spacecraft team used binary code to spell out these words in the fabric of the massive 21-metre parachute used to land on the Red Planet.

When considering the trials and tribulations of the past year and how they have shaken the foundations, not only of healthcare, but also of the modern world, our industry would do well to dig deep, reimagine and forge ahead. This is particularly relevant in terms of our current healthcare dispensation and the tremendous amount of work that awaits us before we can claim equitable access to quality care.

At National HealthCare we have long taken the task of reinvention, dreaming big and of daring mighty things to heart. This past year has been no exception.

In this issue of *The Bulletin* we are sharing news about our expanded specialist network; our stance on the vaccine rollout along with some recent innovations; and future plans aimed at further improving the lives of busy healthcare professionals, clients and healthcare consumers.

In the interim, please be on the lookout for our short National HealthCare Group video and podcasts which will be arriving in your inbox.

Best wishes

Dr Reinder Nauta and Patrick Lubbe



The Covid-19 vaccine

Are you like Dolly Parton – ‘Old enough and smart enough to get it’?

As the *Economist* so succinctly puts it: “Getting the world vaccinated against Covid-19 is a matter of life and death, involving complicated scientific processes, multinational corporations, government promises and backroom deals...”

Last year country music star Dolly Parton donated \$1 million to Vanderbilt University Medical Center, which worked with the drug maker Moderna, to develop one of the first coronavirus vaccines to be authorised in the United States. On Tuesday, 2 March 2021, Ms Parton, aged 75, was delighted to receive her Moderna shot at Vanderbilt Health in Tennessee stating that she was: ‘both old and smart enough to get it’.

Here in South Africa, Dr Zweli Mkhize, Minister of Health tweeted this message on 13 April 2021: “As of today, the total number of confirmed #COVID19 cases is 1 559 960 the total number of deaths is 53 423 the total number of recoveries is 1 485 315 and the total number of vaccines administered is 292 623.”

On Tuesday evening the health ministry temporarily halted the rollout of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine over potential blood clot risks reported by the United States. “We have determined to voluntarily suspend our rollout until the causal relationship between the development of clots and the Johnson and Johnson vaccine is sufficiently interrogated. I humbly call for calm and patience as we ensure that we continue to be properly guided by science in ensuring the safety of our people as we roll out the vaccine campaign,” Mkhize stated.

It’s all systems go for the world’s greatest vaccine rollout

National HealthCare is fully behind the Government’s vaccine rollout plan. As has been communicated by Government, the vaccines will not be available for everyone immediately and will be distributed as part of a carefully phased rollout plan, which will be directed by the National Department of Health. Our understanding is that everyone will be considered in the same way, regardless of private or public sector.

Like many other healthcare organisations, we are working closely with the National Department of Health to ensure that members under our care, and particularly at-risk members, are provided with access to the vaccine as soon as it becomes available.

As stipulated by the Department of Health everyone receiving the vaccine will register on the Electronic Vaccine Data System (EVDS), including private sector providers. The EVDS will control *Track and Trace* and will provide those who receive the vaccination with a certificate upon completion.

Vaccination now included as a Prescribed Minimum Benefit

With the vaccine now included in the amended Prescribed Minimum Benefit (PMB) regulations by the Council for Medical Schemes (CMS) it is mandatory for medical schemes to fund it.

Screening, clinically appropriate diagnostic tests, vaccination, medication, medical management including hospitalisation and treatment of complications, and rehabilitation of Covid-19 are now all included as PMBs which means that they too will be funded by all schemes.

National HealthCare fully embraces the Government’s three-phase vaccination schedule, which aims to achieve herd immunity by vaccinating 67% of the population of the country come year-end.

Adherence to Covid-19 precautions remain key

Nevertheless, the most effective way to remain safe is for each individual to closely adhere to Covid-19 precautions including washing hands regularly, adhering to social distancing, and always wearing a mask in public and the presence of others, to protect yourselves and to help prevent the spread of the virus.

We cannot emphasise strongly enough the need for all these precautions to be diligently followed, as every person has a responsibility to help ‘flatten this new curve’ and avoid contracting and passing on the virus.

The National HealthCare Group's Specialist Network

In 2020 National HealthCare Group substantially grew its network of general practitioners, pharmacies and other healthcare service providers by 10% to an impressive 11 400. The group has also expanded its inroads in the specialist market...

According to Brett de Klerk, Chief Operating Officer of National HealthCare Group, given the growth of the company and following requests from clients, it stood to reason that the company needed to extend its national network of specialists.

In recent months Brett and his team have had positive engagements with more than 270 specialists and have signed up most of these specialists on a national basis. To date obstetricians, cardiologists, ophthalmologists, paediatricians, urologists, physicians, general surgeons and pulmonologists have joined the National HealthCare specialist network across South Africa.

With accessibility being of key importance the group were delighted to welcome specialists from the Eastern Cape, Free State, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and North West Province.

If you would like to join the National HealthCare Group's specialist network please talk to us. You can call Corrie Collins on 021 276 5600 or email us at info@nationalhealthcare.co.za.

Zoom fatigue? It's real. But on the other hand...

Although scientists, just like everyone else are getting 'Zoom fatigue' they want virtual meetings to stay after the pandemic. A recent *Nature* poll shows that a year of online research conferences has delivered considerable benefits, but blending them with in-person meetings in future will be a challenge.

After navigating a year of online research presentations, the majority of survey respondents -74% think that scientific meetings should continue to be virtual, or have a virtual component, after the pandemic ends. The overwhelming proportion of the 900 individuals surveyed cite the ease of attending from anywhere in the world as a major perk, although they admit that virtual events have not been able to simulate the networking with colleagues they enjoyed in person.

On the road to the 'next best thing'

Technology in healthcare is constantly evolving, and with Covid-19 casting its web across the world, this technology has spread almost as fast as the virus itself.

National HealthCare Group were certainly one of the pioneers of the healthcare tech revolution in May last year when we introduced the tech savvy Medi-Club Connect™, which leverages mobile communication and chat commerce technology so that patients can have access to healthcare advice and doctor's consultations via WhatsApp.

Brett de Klerk, says that National HealthCare Group started with the white labelling and customisation of its MobiApp, which has been around for some time. The App was recently personalised for use by members of Essential Employee Benefits, a long-standing client of the National HealthCare Group.

While the MobiApp is not new technology in itself, it is how you use it that makes all the difference. Within the National HealthCare context, it can be used to find a pharmacy, a general practitioner and even obtain general healthcare information or home remedies for small ailments.

According to De Klerk the Group currently has a portal for doctors via the web, which is securely managed and is being used to access remittance advices, check membership eligibility as well as for the submission of queries. In order to further ease the pressure on healthcare professionals the group is looking to extend its current tech offering so that doctors can also obtain online authorisations.

“ 74% think that scientific meetings should continue to be virtual, or have a virtual component, after the pandemic ends. ”

Can the Consumer Protection Act change healthcare for the better?

On 1 April this year, the new Consumer Protection Act comes into force.

The healthcare industry has repeatedly come under public fire for its poor customer service. Caught up in the complications of multiple take-overs, a changing legislative environment and medical inflation, the healthcare industry continues to be one of the most severely impacted in terms of customer perceptions.

To its credit, it took swift and incisive measures to turn the negative into a positive. Significant investment took place in new communication infrastructure, staff training, restructuring, drastic lopping of 'deadwood' and shedding non-profit making sectors of the business. Extensive research was conducted into the development of innovative product ranges, designing options to suit members' medical service usage patterns. In-house campaigns focused on new company ethics, boosting staff morale and rewarding productivity. Still, the healthcare consumer remained an unhappy one.

After all, apart from the fact that healthcare has long been the ultimate grudge purchase, there has always been a lack of understanding between the industry and its clients. Much of this was caused by the use of legalese and of overly complex language, which served the single purpose of protecting companies rather than consumers.

The old adage "least said, soonest mended" has so often held sway in the industry. It is so much easier to print glossy brochures than to answer the questions of aggrieved patients and customers. Instead of returning telephone calls and resolving problems or simply writing a straightforward letter of apology, companies hide from the customers whom they are meant to serve.

More often than not they forget that without their client base they have no business. Those who do take the trouble to respond to consumers, use words and convoluted language to keep the distance that they want to maintain between themselves and their clients.

Some of the greatest products and services are presented in such a clumsy, complex way that even the most simplistic of concepts become clouded by words.

Finally, putting the customer first

The Consumer Protection Act is expected to fundamentally change the way business is done in South Africa. We are told that the Act requires businesses to transform the way in which they interact with consumers and to ensure that all their dealings with consumers are fair, reasonable and honest.

Simply put, it means putting the customer first. Talking to people in a way that they can understand and relate to. In essence, it is about closing the gap that has for so long marred customer relations in the South African private healthcare landscape.

Over and above the use of language the Act deals with an array of consumer related issues, many of which are also enshrined in The New Companies Act, King IV and The National Credit Act.

The power of plain language

With so much business conducted in writing, the use of plain language in every facet of communications is a responsibility that no company can afford to take lightly. When writing on consumer related healthcare issues, many of which are understandably complex and emotive, communicators and marketers need to take heed of conveying succinct and factual information balanced with empathy. Equally, articles and advertisements need to be written in plain language that is straightforward and easy to understand. Thankfully for the healthcare consumer, the Consumer Protection Act means there is no longer a place for jargon, exaggeration or for false and misleading claims.

To summarise, the plain language requirement applies broadly to 'any notice, document or visual representation.' Plain language removes misunderstanding. Instead of being harmful to businesses it can actually be a blessing in disguise. Consider this: If for example you are a medical scheme, it will bring you closer to your members. It will help you in understanding what members really want and need in terms of products and services. It will assist you in communicating the perils of misusing benefits and can, if handled appropriately, be good for the financial wellbeing of a medical scheme. The power of plain language in a country as diverse and multi-faceted as ours should not be underestimated. Simply put - plain language makes sense.

A last word

Human rights have been hard won in South Africa. The Consumer Protection Act takes these rights to a whole new level and is possibly one of the nation's greatest achievements to date.

Even though the Act may cost businesses a little more in the short term, it can and will reap handsome dividends in the long run. The reward lies in getting it right, which will without doubt result in greater customer satisfaction and an improved bottom line.



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