

Opinions on the suggestion that Malawians should start paying for health services in a bid to improve health care in the country

Should Malawians start paying for health care services? Thengo Kavinya

Malawi is a low income country in Southern Africa characterized by a heavy burden of disease evidenced by high levels of child and adulthood mortality rates and high prevalence of diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria, HIV/AIDS and other tropical diseases¹. Furthermore, evidence suggests that there is a growing burden of non-communicable diseases¹. The government of Malawi has a national healthcare service which is government funded, and free to all Malawians at the point of delivery. This is provided in three forms: Health centers at the local level, Regional/Rural Hospitals one level up, and District Hospitals at the highest level.

According to WHO, total expenditure on health per capita is just US\$50, and expenditure on health as a percentage of GDP is only 6.2%¹. With very little funding, investigations are limited by resources, and diagnosis is largely based on clinical presentation. Most laboratory, imaging, and testing facilities are often only available at the major District Hospitals¹. In recent years the country health system has been compromised with challenges ranging from poor management of the Locum programme, inadequate budget allocation to the health sector, drug pilferage and neighboring countries taking advantage of Malawi's free health service.

It is from this background that the Ministry of Health organized a public debate with an aim of exploring and discuss several challenges that the health delivery system is currently facing. In her contribution during this debate the executive director of Malawi Health Equity Network Martha Kwataine suggested Malawians should start paying for the provision of health service so as to improve on its delivery. She said despite government initiative to provide resources this are just too little therefore there is the need for Malawians to start paying for these services so that that our health service is sustainable.

Official reports indicate that the instability of drug supply at country health facilities is resultant of influx of patients from neighbouring countries accessing free drugs at the health centers, and run away from paying for medicine at the public health facilities in their countries. I sought some views on this suggestion.....

Andrew Phiri 26

Health Surveillance Officer

I don't like her suggestion. As an alternative, I think there is need for a deliberate government policy to encourage private health service providers to open up clinics across the country. The policy may include tax free, rural electrification, etc on the private clinics so that they should reduce their service charges. This will reduce congestion in government hospitals and also hence make them more capable.

Eugene Mbukwa 30

Clerical Officer

The system was set up that health care services should be paid by Malawians through tax. Her statement should have probably read Malawians should stop paying for health services through tax but pay at the health service delivery point. It is the duty of those entrusted with finances to channel adequate tax money to this service. Otherwise only those with higher income can start paying let the poor still get the free health care service if government has the capability of trucking the users since there are no IDs which made the user fees proposal die in the 90s due to lack of better system to truck who is poor and who is rich the need for politicians to gain votes by not implementing the user fees for health care across the board

Innocent Phiri 33

Environmental Health Officer

A very good idea indeed. Thank you Martha for standing up for the truth. It is high time people in this country started to assume a certain measure of responsibility for their livelihood.

Michael Nkhata 28

Nursing Student

I agree with Kwataine only if the policy should let the poor access free services and those with good income contribute an affordable amount for a beginning. After all in rural mission health Centers medical services are not free and this is already happening.

Amon Kalanda 32

Teacher

Paying for Health services would be a step in the right direction. I stay in Dedza where I have seen that over 49 % who access District Health Hosp. are Mozambicans who are renowned for illtreating Malawians on their land. I for one cannot allow my taxes to be used by foreigners. If we start paying we are assured of quality health services and dedication of health services.

1. <http://www.afro.who.int/en/malawi/country-health-profile>