Position Statement: Empowering Specialist Family Physicians in Private Sector Healthcare in South Africa

Introduction

This statement, endorsed by the South African Academy of Family Physicians (SAAFP) and the South African Society of Specialist Family Physicians (SASOSFP), aims to champion the pivotal role of Specialist Family Physicians (SFP) in private sector healthcare in South Africa. Its purpose is to clarify the contribution of SFP to the private sector and to advocate for recognition and remuneration appropriate to the specialty.

Elevating Family Medicine in South Africa

Family Medicine stands as the bedrock of primary care, with SFP being uniquely qualified to address the healthcare needs of all ages holistically, from the earliest stages of life to the golden years. Beyond conventional specialties, SFPs seamlessly integrate Lifestyle Medicine, Preventive Medicine and Palliative Care into their practices, adapting to the dynamic landscape of modern medicine.(1)

Global Recognition and Local Imperatives

Recognised globally by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and classed as an essential component of primary health care (PHC) systems in countries such as Kenya and Botswana, SFPs embody the essence of comprehensive healthcare delivery at an advanced level.(2) In the South African context, two medical primary care providers coexist, these being: General Practitioners, who have a MBCHB degree, and SFP, who have four years of postgraduate training, a Master's degree in Family Medicine, and a Fellowship (FCFP) awarded by the College of Family Physicians of South Africa, leading to registration as specialists with the HPCSA.

However, there is a lack of clarity and recognition amongst healthcare funders and private sector institutions regarding the SFP. As a result, SFP are often regarded as glorified general practitioners, specifically in the private sector, where the lack of guidelines and structural recognition results in their not being included or prevented from operating within their full mandate.

The Multifaceted Roles of Specialist Family Physicians

In both the public and private sectors, SFPs serve as clinical experts, consultants, capacity builders, clinical trainers and governance leaders. In addition, in the public sector SFP focus on community-oriented primary care and district health services. In the private sector, SFPs champion the core functions of high-quality primary care, strategically reducing healthcare costs and spearheading quality improvement initiatives.(5)

SFP possess a unique skill set that enables them to manage a broad spectrum of conditions across age groups and disciplines. Their ability to handle complex cases and patients with multi-morbidity eliminates the need for unnecessary referrals to disease specific specialists, rendering care more effective, efficient, and economical.(6,7,8,9,10) By including a focus on health promotion, disease prevention and palliative care, SFPs contribute to reducing preventable diseases and optimising the utilisation of healthcare resources.(11,12,13,14,15)

Their multi-faceted approach to health care makes them uniquely equipped to have a holistic understanding of the complex factors that can affect health conditions and are able to guide their patients through the various systems within the health care environment, to ensure that the care they receive addresses their needs and meets their budgets.

Addressing Disparities

This lack of recognition by medical aids and funders of the scope of practice and competencies of the SFP has resulted in disparities in comparison to other specialties that have been recognised by the HPCSA.

Despite being officially gazetted as specialists by the Health Professional Council of South Africa (HPCSA) in 2007, the absence of guidelines that address professional recognition, by private sector institutions and organisations has resulted in a disparity in remuneration between SFP and other specialists, and cast a shadow on the attractiveness of Family Medicine as a career choice.

The HPCSA's recognition of the specialty needs to be replicated within all private sector health organisations to ensure that SFP are accepted as specialists. This will enable the profession to attract capable individuals who are passionate about primary health care and foster the development of a highly competent and committed workforce in the field. In line with this recognition, standard guidelines need to be developed for use across the health sector on remunerating SFPs for their diverse procedural skills and therapeutic interventions.

The following areas require specific guidelines to address these disparities:

- **Specialist recognition**: Acknowledge SFP as specialists reflecting their expertise and complexity of their practice.
- **Holistic remuneration**: Remunerate SFPs for diverse procedural skills,

therapeutic interventions and complex clinical management based on a tiered consultation process.

- **Access to specialist privileges:** Access to order advanced imaging and tests in line with other specialists and to prescribe medications on the specialist formulary to enhance the quality of holistic care.
- **Mental health care services recognition**: Acknowledge and remunerate SFP for providing mental health services and psychotherapy based on a tiered consultation process.
- **Innovative preventive health packages**: Support the compilation of preventive health and lifestyle medicine categories to address current epidemic of conditions such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, and cancer.
- **Peer review system**: Establish a fair and unbiased peer review system that recognises their unique challenges and patient populations.
- **Tailored managed healthcare packages**: Support the creation of specific packages that are tailored to SFPs' specialist scope of practice and address the intricacies of their breadth of care.

Conclusion

This statement is a clarion call to reshape the narrative of Family Medicine in South Africa. Empowering Specialist Family Physicians to fulfil their mandates will address disparities in access to health care services and redefine healthcare delivery **in the private sector** by placing quality, efficiency, and patient-centred care at the forefront. After 17 years, recognition of the invaluable contributions of Specialist Family Physicians needs to be formalised to ensure that they take their rightful place in the South African health care sector.

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