**Supporting mental health – prioritising access in a time of rising pressure**

Kevin Aron, Principal Officer at Medshield Medical Scheme

**Last week, South Africa joined the rest of the world in marking World Mental Health Day (10 October). It is a significant opportunity to shed light on mental health, reduce stigma, and foster open conversations. However, here is the question: should mental health remain a once-a-year concern, or must we make continuous access and implementation our daily priority?**

The reality is sobering. According to the World Health Organisation, more than 1 billion people worldwide are living with mental health disorders. Specifically, the WHO reports that rates of anxiety and depression are sharply increasing, with these conditions accounting for significant human suffering and economic losses globally.

In South Africa, research indicates that around a third of people will experience a mental health disorder at some point in their lives. However, many individuals affected do not access or receive the necessary care according to national surveys.

Poverty, unemployment, inequality, crime, and gender-based violence all play a part. The lingering effects of COVID-19, substance abuse, and limited access to professional care deepen these challenges.

**Why implementation matters**

The costs of inaction are high. For example, a study published in *Comprehensive Psychiatry* estimates that South Africa loses over R160 billion per year due to untreated mental health disorders. This financial impact does not yet account for the additional costs faced by families, workplaces, and communities.

On paper, there are promising steps. The Department of Health's National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan 2023–2030 sets out bold intentions; from tackling youth suicide and substance abuse, to boosting budgets and addressing the shortage of professionals.

Yet the central challenge persists of turning policy into actual, accessible care. Past initiatives, like the 2013–2020 Mental Health Strategic Plan, saw many promised reforms stall. The South African Depression and Anxiety group cites the Life Esidimeni tragedy as an example of poor implementation. The NGO says many promised reforms have yet to materialise. These included increased staffing and training, better infrastructure, and stronger oversight. Additionally, many actions outlined in the plan remain unimplemented.

The South African Federation for Mental Health claims provincial Health Departments have not increased funding for community-based mental health services provided by NGOs. In some cases, they claim, government funding has been cut. NGOs must then find alternative financial support to keep communities from being left vulnerable.

**Mental health is everyone's business**

The truth is, government cannot do it alone. Mental health is everyone's business; and it requires collective responsibility.

Looking at youth mental health, data reported by national sources state that 9% of teenage deaths in South Africa are due to suicide, and one in five high school learners has attempted to take their own lives. Additionally, the average age of drug dependency onset is 12 years, and about half of all South African teenagers have tried alcohol. These distressing numbers highlight urgent mental health challenges.

The impact is universal. Addressing mental health must be a shared, society-wide duty to ensure access for all. There is also the constant fear of being stigmatised. Those who need support often feel vulnerable talking about it. If we want progress, we must normalise these conversations, treat them as part of overall wellbeing, and ensure people know that asking for help is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength.

Promoting open dialogue, providing access to resources, and supporting those in need are critical steps to breaking the stigma and silence, so that mental health is not seen as a weakness but a core part of human wellbeing.

**The role of medical schemes**

Medical aid schemes also have a role. Access to cover is vital in mental health. Members need chronic treatment and support, including consultations with psychologists and psychiatrists, therapy, prescribed medication, and in-hospital treatment or rehabilitation for severe cases.

At Medshield, we prioritise mental health. Our benefit options provide coverage for consultations, therapy sessions, prescribed medication, and in-hospital care when needed.

We have introduced Medshield Mind, an online platform with mental wellness resources for our members. Whether managing stress or seeking deeper guidance, these tools are available anytime, anywhere. Support should never be out of reach.

**Looking ahead**

Progress in healthcare means we must prioritise mental health as much as physical health. Ensuring access and ongoing support is critical to building stronger families, healthier societies, and better workplaces.

At Medshield, we are committed to walking this journey with our members. Let us make World Mental Health awareness month an actual turning point by starting now—talk openly about mental health every day, support those who need help, and advocate together for better access to care for all. Mental wellness requires daily action and collective effort. Join us in ensuring accessible mental health care is the standard, not the exception.

**FIN**

(786 words)

**EDITORS NOTES**

**FURTHER MEDIA INFORMATION AND INTERVIEW REQUESTS**

* Stone issues this release on behalf of the Medshield Medical Scheme.
* For media enquiries or interview requests, please contact Willem Eksteen, CEO of Stone or a media liaison member of the Stone team at media@stone.consulting / 011 447 0168
* Alternatively, contact Lilané Swanepoel at Medshield at 010 597 4982 / lilanes@medshield.co.za

**MORE INFORMATION ON THE 2026 MEDSHIELD BENEFIT OPTIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

Benefits and Contribution amendments are subject to CMS approval.

Please refer to the 2026 Product Page on the Medshield website at <https://medshield.co.za/>.

You can review the benefit adjustments, and value adds and download the 2026 benefit guides by visiting <https://medshield.co.za/2026-products/2026-benefit-options/> or by scanning the relevant QR code:

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| --- | --- |
| **Benefit package and descriptor** | **QR code to view more detail** |
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| **PremiumPlus** provides Corporate Executives and mature families and professionals with unlimited hospital cover in a hospital of their choice, with In-Hospital Medical Practitioner consultations and visits paid at 200% Medshield Private Tariff, and the freedom to manage daily healthcare expenses through a comprehensive Personal Savings Account and extended Above Threshold Cover. |  |
| **MediBonus** provides mature families and professionals with unlimited hospital cover in a hospital of their choice, with In-Hospital Medical Practitioner consultations and visits paid at 200% Medshield Private Tariff, and the independence to manage daily healthcare expenses through a substantial Day-to-Day Limit.  |  |
| **MediSaver** is perfect for independent individuals and young professionals thinking about expanding their families. MediSaver offers unlimited hospital cover in the Compact Hospital Network, with the freedom to manage daily healthcare expenses through a generous Personal Savings Account. |  |
| **MediPlus** provides middle to upper-income families with complete healthcare cover for major medical and daily healthcare needs. Unlimited hospital cover is provided through a choice of two hospital networks, Prime or the value-focused Compact Hospital Network. Daily healthcare expenses are covered through a generous Day-to-Day Limit. Benefits are identical in both categories, Prime and Compact, with care coordination and doctor referral mandated on MediPlus Compact.  |  |
| **MediCore** is ideal for healthy individuals looking for comprehensive hospital cover, with daily healthcare expenses self-managed. This option offers unlimited hospital cover in the Compact Hospital Network, with In-Hospital Medical Practitioner consultations and visits paid at Medshield Private Tariff 200%. Day-to-day healthcare expenses are self-funded. |  |
| **MediValue** is the ideal option for growing families. It offers affordable cover for major medical and daily healthcare needs. Unlimited hospital cover is provided through a choice of two hospital networks, Prime or the value-focused Compact Hospital Network. Daily healthcare expenses are covered through a sizeable Day-to-Day Limit. Benefits are identical on both options, MediValue Prime and MediValue Compact, with care coordination and doctor referral mandated on MediValue Compact. |  |
| **MediPhila** is ideal for families seeking first-time access to affordable private medical cover. As a MediPhila member, you have unlimited hospital cover  treatment in the Compact Hospital Network, and Day-to-Day cover for your essential daily healthcare needs. |  |
| **MediCurve** If you are young and healthy, then MediCurve is the ideal first-time option for you! MediCurve provides unlimited hospital cover in the Compact  Hospital Network combined with unlimited virtual General Practitioner consultations and essential optical and dental cover through network providers. |  |

**MORE ABOUT MEDSHIELD MEDICAL SCHEME**

* You never know when you or your family member/s may require medical care or treatment, and most importantly, whether you will have funds available to cover the costs. Medshield is a healthcare fund where all members contribute to the fund every month to cater for medical coverage should the need arise. Medshield is a healthcare fund where all members contribute towards the fund monthly to cater for medical cover should the need arise.
* Medshield has been in operation since 1968, making us one of the most experienced, knowledgeable, and reliable medical schemes in South Africa. Our extensive experience in the healthcare sector guides our understanding of our members' needs. Our excellent cover and benefits and the best quality systems and services have resulted in our exceptional size and strength.
* Each of our options offers affordably priced benefits. We continuously review and improve the range of benefits in each option to bring you what you need.
* We partner with our stakeholders to enable access to sustainable and **affordable quality healthcare** through innovative products and benefits.
* Our impeccable reputation of prompt payments to hospitals, doctors, pharmacies and other medical caregivers guarantees approval from service providers when you present your Medshield membership card.
* Our extensive partner networks place us in the perfect position to offer exceptionally competitive rates to our members.
* Medshield is well-represented throughout all nine provinces and provides seamless access to service providers in your area. Our geographical spread provides convenience if it becomes necessary for you to have a personal discussion with one of our experienced consultants. We also have a streamlined online claim submission system and immediate contact centre assistance, making it easier to manage your membership and claims from the convenience of your home or office.
* Another distinguishing factor is our extensive range of additional benefits and services. These benefits and services have been designed to give members additional support when needed, for instance, in an emergency or when suffering from a chronic or life-threatening condition.
* Compared with other medical schemes, our trustworthiness, impeccable history, and exceptional service guarantee that we come out tops!
* As the interface between the Scheme and our members, Medshield staff are the backbone of our customer service delivery. The successful delivery of service depends entirely on the calibre of our people.