

Pandemic moves role of MedTech sector front and centre

SAMED conference focuses on growing Medtech post-Pandemic and identifies the key role SA's medtech sector can play in economic recovery.

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annual conference which took place virtually from 19-21 October 2021 highlighted the fundamental role that the medical technology sector has played in the global pandemic response, and how it continues to play a foundational role in the frontline delivery of quality healthcare and economic recovery.

“The COVID-19 pandemic exposed new vulnerabilities resulting from changing social, environmental, demographic, regulatory and technological conditions, which have the potential to reverse the gains in health,

wellness and prosperity enabled by medical advances and health systems over the last century. The pandemic also leapfrogged advances throughout the healthcare delivery system, bringing about innovation, more research and development and unprecedented levels of collaboration across public and private sectors and across geographies.

“These advances, in the absence of the pandemic impetus, may have taken years to materialise, if ever. It is incumbent on every stakeholder to ensure that the gains made on the frontlines of healthcare delivery in this crisis are not lost,” explains Marlon Burgess, Chairperson of the [South African Medical Technology Association](#) (SAMED).

Key themes unpacked at the conference included:

[Medtech](#) Innovation: South Africa needs to unpack where our next innovative medtech solutions are coming from, and how we improve current offerings, onshore. Traditional innovation pathways between SMEs, industry and universities need to be revived, capacitated and funded. Government has an important role to play in bringing funders, SMEs and academic sector together and providing tax and financial incentives to support collaboration and innovation. Open innovation was another tremendously effective tool during the pandemic when there simply was no time to do deals, build things up and wait for much-needed funding – it needs to

be fostered in our post-pandemic recovery.

Boosting local manufacture and job creation: South Africa's reliance on imports and dwindling manufacturing capabilities were thrown into stark relief during the pandemic. A stronger medtech manufacturing sector would boost South Africa's economic recovery, enhance trade into Africa, strengthen national and continental healthcare systems, and improve access to health services. South Africa has the potential to be a MedTech hub for Africa and legislation should enable economic engagement with the rest of Africa - aligned to the African Continental Free-Trade Agreement.

Government has a major role to play in providing well-informed strategic guidance, an enabling policy and regulatory environment and resolving cross-cutting economic challenges including securing the power supply and cost. South Africa has significant potential for a vibrant medtech manufacturing industry in South Africa and the continent. The government has recognised the healthcare sector as a priority sector for economic stimulus projects, and to this end the DTIC approach SAMED and MDMSA to collaborate in programmes with the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC), Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), Department of Science and Innovation, the SA Medical Research Council (SAMRC) and the Technology Innovation Agency (TIA).

Medtech policy and regulations: Regulation of healthcare, including medtech, plays a critically important role in all circumstances and certainly during health emergencies. However, regulatory processes need review and reform, including an overhaul of administrative systems to attain the agility required in times of crises. Robust problem-solving, agility in introducing new policies and regulations, and capacity to fast-track licensing are critical to ensure supply in times of crisis. The pandemic has highlighted an urgent need to review, align and improve regulatory processes across government agencies before another health crisis occurs. SAMED impressed upon policy makers the need to formulate a joint response to future health emergencies and include input from all stakeholders. Scenario planning and pressure-testing, with the participation of all stakeholders would identify gaps and help build solutions that can be implemented and avoid the unintended consequences of regulation that does not fully appreciate the diversity and complexity of the medtech sector. With a more enabling policy and regulatory environment, the



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medtech sector's current estimated R20 Billion market value could be significantly increased to re-position South Africa's role and contribution to the sector across Africa.

Universal Health Coverage and NHI: SAMED recognises that the inequities of the current fragmented healthcare system are untenable and that a well-formulated NHI is crucial to advancing universality and social solidarity in a patient-centric, equitable health system. The reality is that both private and public healthcare face enormous challenges and that failed implementation will have catastrophic consequences for patients and economy. SAMED highlighted a number of aspects in the context of the NHI bill, including the pitfalls of a single payer/single buyer system which will not ensure optimal outcomes for price or supply of medtech due to its monopolistic nature. Furthermore, the nature of medtech must be taken into consideration. Medtech has rapid cycles of improvement, clinical variation and innovation, there is a need for data management, software upgrades, replacement of consumables, after sales service, maintenance and training, service contracts, sub-specialities of devices and bespoke products made per patient. The role of healthcare practitioners also comes into play as the main users and specifiers of medtech for each patient's needs – which is mismatched to a single buyer/payer model proposed under NHI. South Africa's worsening fiscal constraints and eroded tax base also have significant implications for a purely public-funded system. It was pointed out that no public funder/single payer system has achieved universal access anywhere in the world, and the private sector plays a significant role to close the gap.

“Collaboration among a wide range of role-players is fundamental to strengthening the South African health system, which is the country's best defence against future health crises. At the same time, ongoing and long-term patient care cannot be sacrificed, and therefore policy makers must consider models and mechanisms for patients to receive the care and consultation they require, even during a pandemic.

“We support the funding and implementation of health innovation as a tool to meet diverse and challenging health needs within all communities. As the representative body of the medtech industry in South Africa, SAMED stands ready to engage with government and its agencies on measures aimed at accomplishing and building an improved and agile healthcare sector,” concludes Burgess.

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