

Trend to downplay specialists can affect patients adversely

Dangers in short-cut testing

THE ever-increasing use of managed care programmes by medical schemes, combined with the growing ease with which untrained individuals can access and use technology, has led to a dangerous trend of downplaying the role of the medical specialist in modern patient care.

Tony Harrison, chairman of the National Pathology Group (NPG), says this could adversely affect patients and medical schemes.

"There is a false assumption in many quarters that a generalist can provide the same kind of input, analysis and diagnosis that a specialist can. Pathology is one speciality where the ability to add value is undermined by this trend.

"Modern society, with its demands for instant gratification, is

rather taken with the notion of short-cut pathology testing in the doctor's room. The long-term implications for patient care are extremely disturbing."

A cornerstone of managed care is the introduction of a "gatekeeper" to prevent abuse or over-use of medical services. Ideally, this is the family doctor.

However, attaching mini-laboratories to general medical practices undermines this principle, he says.

"Internationally, health authorities have expressed concern that physician self-referral of clinical laboratory services encourages excessive ordering and inappropriate utilisation of laboratory tests, given the inherent conflict of interest in ownership, reward and the

use of apparatus requiring significant capital input."

Most NPG laboratories have been accredited by the South African National Accreditation Service, thus complying with international standards, he says.

Harrison says the gravest dangers of managed care practices that bypass specialist input or restrict the use of laboratory testing are to the health of the patient.

"Early diagnosis facilitates improved patient treatment, care and recovery. Restricting access to specialist services can increase costs in the long term." He says the American Society for Clinical Laboratory Science has said that unqualified testing personnel unnecessarily increase the cost of healthcare.