From the Editor's Desk

Recently there has been a great deal of discussion in the lay press regarding the rapidly advancing costs of health care and especially that of costs relating to the private sector, and both hospitals and medical specialists have sometimes been blamed for these high costs and for the rapid growth of medical inflation beyond that of more general inflationary pressures that might exist. Other sources or persons, often with a medical or paramedical background, have instead suggested that the real problem lies with medical aid organizations where administrative and other costs are too high; and benefits are often believed by medical aid members to be inadequate especially those applying to older members and their needs. The situation in the public health sector is even more problematic with inadequate resources, and the quantity and sometimes quality of medical and other personnel being amongst some of the restrictions encountered. Yet others feel that the government, or perhaps the manufacturers or distributors of health care products, drugs and instruments, are the problem and assign blame at their doorsteps. But the problem is not just a national one and many other parts of the world are experiencing similar difficulties. So what needs to change in South Africa, for example, to address some of the pertinent issues? In my view the overall lack of competition in medicine and related fields and particularly the lack of more comprehensive information and proper advertising of medical costs is one of the primary factors contributing to the often inflated amounts that medical and other health professionals are earning or demanding. And, this is also true for private hospitals and clinics that are quite frankly, in my opinion, earning outrageous amounts from an often compliant and complacent medical aid industry and also generally apathetic or unaware consumers. Many of the Professional Boards and the Health Professions Council of South Africa itself are also partially responsible for previously inadequate actions that have produced the current situation in this country. One can only hope that they will eventually follow a much more aggressive (and much more publicfriendly) approach towards providing or creating a health care system and industry that offers sufficient excellence of service and care at fair and reasonable value but which still provides a good, but not obscene, income for medical professionals and others in related areas such as optometry and pharmacy.

Individuals without medical aid assistance, and also the members of medical aids, will also need to become more aware of their possible contribution and role towards promoting their own health and well-being and irresponsible and careless behaviour, such as excessive alcohol consumption and subsequent driving or aggressive actions, that substantially increase their risks of developing unnecessary disease or dysfunction or produces similar effects in others should probably be treated with a little less sympathy than is currently the case.

Finally, inflated and unnecessary expenses and more particularly the salaries and other benefits of the organizations and individuals concerned within the medical aid industry should probably be considered more closely and greater competition should be encouraged to further limit these contributing factors towards high levels of medical costs and inflation. And, similarly, the bodies that provide medical services in the form of drugs and medically-related instruments and equipment should also be subject to closer scrutiny and competition here should also be promoted to a much greater extent as a means towards reducing costs and developing a profitable but affordable supporting industry for health and medical care.

So, not surprisingly, the responsibility for creating a better and more affordable system of health care is a multi-facetted and complicated one that requires many issues to be considered and modified efficiently and effectively and many players or components are part of the problem and thus also need to be part of the solution.