

GOVERNMENT REGULATIONS AND PALLIATIVE MEASURES IN THE HEALTH SECTOR AMIDST COVID 19 PANDEMIC.

In the wake of the COVID 19 pandemic, the Federal and State Government have undertaken stringent measures such as the creation of new laws, regulations and orders to tackle the spread of COVID 19 in the country. The Federal Government on the 29th of March 2020, ordered a cessation of all movements in Lagos, Ogun, and the FCT for an initial period of fourteen (14) days which began on the 30th of March 2020. On the 12th of March 2020 the Federal Government extended the lockdown by another 14days which was to end on the 27th of April 2020. Subsequently on the 27th of April, the Federal Government extended the lockdown to the 4th of May 2020. These steps are to enable the government track the spread of COVID-19 within these areas. Nearly all State Governments in Nigeria have also initiated some form of lockdown and border closure e.g Kano, Plateau, Delta, Bauchi States etc. However, certain businesses are exempted from the lockdown restrictions, particularly those providing health related and essential services, including hospitals and related medical establishments, organizations in healthcare related manufacturing and distribution, amongst others.¹

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT PALLIATIVES IN THE HEALTH SECTOR

The Federal Government (FG) has provided a few palliatives in its fight against COVID-19. Of relevance is the sum of N102.5 billion approved by the FG as stimulus for direct interventions in the health sector across the country; N6.5 billion of which has been made available to the NCDC for critical expenditure. Also, Lagos State has been provided with N10billion in emergency funding. More funds are to be provided from the N500 billion COVID Crisis Intervention Fund.

Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN)

The Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) in its response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Nigeria, introduced a number of policy measures which, amongst other measures, includes the provision of a N100 billion credit facility scheme for the healthcare industry. The eligible participants under the scheme are healthcare products manufacturers and pharmaceutical equipments. This Scheme is for indigenous pharmaceutical companies and health care practitioners that are desirous of expansion or increased capacities. In addition, healthcare service providers, medical facilities, pharmaceutical and medical products distribution and logistics services among others are also included. The guideline for the operations of this credit facility for the health sector has been released; the application process is as follows;

- An application is submitted together with a business plan by a corporate body to a Participating Financial Institution (PFI) of its choice.
- The submitted application is appraised by the PFI and, upon approval by the PFI Committee, submitted to CBN.

¹State and regulatory Responses to COVID 19, Lexology.

- The funds is disbursed by CBN to the PFI and thereafter remitted to the beneficiary.

The CBN noted that the Deposit Money Banks and Development Finance Institutions were eligible to disburse the fund.² And the scheme will be funded from the Real Sector Support Facility- Differentiated Cash Reserves Requirement (RSSF-DCCR).

The opportunities available for Legal practitioners (LP) in the CBN N100 billion credit facilities to the health care system are endless, ranging from educating the society on the procedure involved, to drafting of business plans for pharmaceutical companies in line with the existing laws, and also offering the service of loan recovery through debt collection methods.

National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS)

The National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) in its response to the COVID 19 pandemic has effected the immediate release of funds for the payment of capitation and fee-for-service for its enrollees for the second quarter (April to June) of 2020. NHIS has ensured that no enrollee will be turned back from any facility for non-payment of appropriate fees by any Health Maintenance Organization (HMO). NHIS has issued guidelines to the Healthcare Facilities (HCFs) and the Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs) on certain actions to be taken towards protecting the interests of the enrollees in the current situation. The guidelines contain concrete provisions to prevent service failure and also to ensure that enrollees enjoy prompt and effective healthcare services in spite of the general restrictions and outright lockdown in certain parts of the country.

These guidelines give clear order to healthcare providers to provide timely and appropriate level of care for all NHIS enrollees as may be required. And to ensure that no NHIS enrollee is denied access to care. The guidelines also directs the providers to ensure the issuance of authorization codes and to resolve all other issues including prompt report of all cases of denial of authorization codes by HMOs, as well reporting suspected cases to State Ministries of Health.

All NHIS and HMO Call Centers are open 24hours daily to ensure the issuance of authorization codes and resolution of all other issues.³

Nigerian Emergency Economic Stimulus Bill

The House of Representative proposed an Emergency Economic Stimulus Bill on the 24th of March 2020 to cushion the effect of the COVID 19 pandemic in Nigeria. The Bill seeks, amongst others, to suspend import duty on the importation of medical equipments; medication, personal protection equipment and other such medical necessities as may be required for the treatment and management of the COVID 19 disease in Nigeria. Notably the Minister of Health is empowered to specify such goods that qualify for the waiver and where the pandemic extends beyond 31 December 2020, the President is empowered to

²The Next edition, article; COVID 19: CBN releases guidelines for operations of N100billion credit support for health care.

³www.nhis.gov.ng/news/

extend the rebate period. Once the bill is passed at the Senate it would be sent to the President for assent.

FG Special COVID 19 Allowances/ Insurance Cover for Health Workers

The Federal Government (FG) has approved 3 months increase in allowances of medical doctors and other health workers in Nigeria, especially for those on the frontline of the fight against COVID 19. The approval is for 3 categories of healthcare workers. The first category is a payment of 50% of salaries as hazard allowance to health workers, while the second is 40% as consolidated salary for healthcare workers while the last category of workers are those directly at isolation centres who will receive risk allowances of 20% and non-core health workers will get 10% of their salaries. The payment is expected to take effect in March 2020. The FG said it would provide adequate insurance for workers, as well as the employee's compensation insurance. Notably, the Government would be engaging with the Insurance Industry to package special life insurance for healthcare workers.⁴

LAGOS STATE INFECTIOUS DISEASES (EMERGENCY PREVENTION) REGULATION

The Lagos State Government (LSG) issued the Lagos State Infectious Diseases (Emergency Prevention) Regulations 2020. The Regulation grants the Governor power to direct a potentially infectious person within Lagos State to go to a place specified for COVID-19 screening or to go into isolation. The Governor has the power to restrict movement within, into or out of the State, particularly the movement of persons, vehicles, aircraft and watercraft, with the exception of transportation or movement of and for the purposes of procuring essential supplies, such as food, water, pharmaceuticals, medical supplies and medicines, and any other necessary essential supplies.

The Regulation also grants the Governor the power to restrict or prohibit the gathering of persons without the Governor's consent; restrict the conduct of trade, business and commercial activities within the state; and to order the temporary closure of markets, except those selling or manufacturing essential services.

LAGOS STATE PALLIATIVES IN THE HEALTH SECTOR

Lagos State Government (LSG)

The Lagos State Government (LSG) announced that it would be offering free medical services to pregnant women and other persons with health emergencies in the state throughout the month of April 2020. The free medical services are part of the palliative measures to cushion the effect of the lockdown imposed on the state to fight the spread of COVID 19. This palliative applies to all 27 general hospitals, and maternal and child health facilities around the state. Health care services like emergencies, casualties, cases including registration, laboratory tests and surgeries will be treated free of charge. Treatment and delivery of all pregnant women, either through caesarean or normal delivery, in the month of April 2020 are to be conducted free of charge.

⁴ The Punch Online - COVID 19: FG will provide insurance cover for health workers – Finance Minister. Article by Ifeanyi Onuba, Abuja.

Presently over 18,000 persons in Lagos state has accessed the free medical services, with over 600 childbirths all free of charge. The LSG has promised that this medical intervention will continue as part of Government's approach to cushion the effect of the COVID 19 crisis.

Lagos State University Teaching Hospital (LUTH)

In a bid to ease the effect of COVID-19, the Management of LUTH has approved Life Insurance for each of its staff actively working in the fight against COVID-19 in Nigeria. The Management has set up a 120 bed facility by converting Block B of the hospital to an isolation centre.

Increment of Health Workers Hazard Allowance

As part of an incentive to all health officers in the state, as frontline responders in the fight against COVID 19, the Lagos State Government (LSG) has approved an increase in the hazard allowance of health workers in the state public service from N5,000 to N25,000 respectively for the month of April, 2020. This was revealed in circular CIR/HOS/20/vol.1/045 dated April 21st 2020. Accounting officers have been enjoined to note the increment.⁵

Eko TeleMed Health Scheme

The Lagos State Government (LSG) has launched "EKO TELEMED" for residents, as part of concerted efforts aimed at protecting citizens and reducing their risk of contracting COVID 19. This scheme is designed by the Lagos State Health Management Agency (LASHMA). Lagos residents would have access to highly trained & experienced physicians for non-emergency primary care consultations via voice or video call from 22nd April 2020. Any resident who develops any non-COVID 19 health issues during the lockdown period to dial 08000EKOMED = 08000356633 toll free line for consultation. This toll-free line would enable residents converse with doctors in any of the four major languages in Lagos state- English, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. The doctors and case managers would be available 24/7 to provide medical services for a period of eight weeks as the State continues to roll out its strategies for containing the COVID 19 pandemic. However patients with high COVID 19 suspicion will be directed to designate testing sites and isolation centres.⁶

70 Bed Isolation & Treatment Centre in Eti-Osa LGA

The Lagos State Government has unveiled a 70 bed isolation and treatment centre in Eti-Osa Local Government. The 70 bed facility with 10 bed dedicated intensive care unit (ICU) was set up by the Young President Organization (YPO) Lagos chapter and located in the grounds of the Landmark Exhibition Centre, Victoria Island.

Conclusion

⁵Punch online ; Lagos increases health workers hazard allowance to N25,000. April 22, 2020.

⁶ LSMOH; Lagos State Ministry Of Health.

The creation of Government Regulations and Orders in a bid to curb this menace called COVID 19 is necessary to reduce the danger the virus poses to our country. While the Government has extended the lockdown regulations for another 14 days (subject to further review), it is perceived that the public needs to be more sensitized on the dangers of not adhering strictly to these regulations and orders. Notably, as at 29th of April 2020 Nigeria has a total of 1,532 confirmed cases, of which 255 as been discharged and 44 deaths have been recorded and counting.

In reference to the Palliative measures in the health sector, more can be done. However, the Government alone cannot shoulder the responsibilities involved in implementing effective palliative healthcare. The private sectors also have a role to play. Notably, some private organizations and wealthy individuals are also providing healthcare palliatives to the masses to support the government.