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MAKURDI/GUMA FEDERAL CONSTITUENCY

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LEAD DEBATE ON: A BILL FOR AN ACT TO AMEND THE NATIONAL HEALTH BILL 2014 TO INCLUDE FREE AND COMPULSORY PERIODIC MEDICAL TESTS FOR PREVALENT AND CHRONIC AILMENTS ON ALL PERSONS LIVING IN NIGERIA AND FOR OTHER MATTERS THERETO, 2015

SPONSORED BY HON. DICKSON D. TARKIGHIR

Mr Speaker, My Honourable Colleagues,

I lead debate on the subject matter - a bill which sole aim is to canvass a national effort towards early detection of chronic medical ailments. Early detection has a plethora of advantages and all medical personnel are united on this. The assertion that early detection is beneficial to everyone is therefore, a fact.

This bill is based on the undeniable fact that almost all ailments, when detected early, are cheaper to treat, easier to manage or to cure - for those with a cure. Being cheaper, easier to manage, better chance for cure, less suffering for the patient, more likelihood that the patient would seek appropriate and timely help e.t.c, all line up as positives to early detection. The column for the negatives is blank!

Why is this a matter for legislation at all?

Well, Mr Speaker, My Honourable Colleagues, the cost of health care has continued to rise all over the world. This holds true for our country as well. As we are aware, even for the most advanced nations with fully developed health care reforms complete with insurance measures, the best way forward on health care has remained as elusive as it is totally divisive - most times along partisan lines. Entire 4-8 year tenures of administrations are tied to how best to solve health care and even for the United States of America that often pops up with ready examples of a system that works, we can hardly boldly go to their example in this field with the hope of solving our health care

problems or more appropriately, preventing a major health chaos in cost and other epidemics that, quite fearfully, seem inevitable especially as our population continues a geometric sprint to explosion.

Currently, our country is funding the detection of ailments such as HIV and AIDS. As with other ailments, early detection is a huge positive. Unfortunately, the fact that tests for HIV are free in all Government hospitals as well as are the pills for patients; it has not dramatically accelerated the desired numbers in persons who volunteer for these tests. As a result, an ailment that should not kill is unfortunately, killing so many Nigerians and infecting more unsuspecting loved ones.

If we compel Nigerians for their own good, to conduct frequent tests, especially that they are free and their treatment or management are free or highly subsidized, we would be creating a healthier nation. When people know that they are infected, there is a higher likelihood that they will seek treatment.

Mr Speaker, My Honourable Colleagues, when we make an effort to solve any problem via a piece of legislation, for example, through enactment of a law, our processes (the various bill making stages) help guarantee that experts in such field sit to contribute professional knowledge that helps to shape the eventual outcome. We should create this opportunity so that together, we shall arrive at an effective health care law that reduces cost, improves management, enhances the chances of a cure and lead to a nation where everyone is aware of their health status - at least the chronic or potentially chronic ones.

While this bill makes no claim to being exhaustive on subject matter, it is my honest opinion, Mr Speaker, My Honourable Colleagues, that, the country's ministry of health under a Minister of health should periodically articulate for country, a health policy detailing on chronic ailments that shall fall under this bill and require that Nigerians test for. Not only will such measure provide data that guides our National and State budget priorities in the health sector, it tells us what health concerns are to attract subsidies. We would have a holistic data of what percentage of the population is suffering from what ailment and we can better advance policies and make budget decisions informed by such data.

How much will this cost? Wouldn't compulsion for tests amount to invasion of privacy?

There are several questions about this initiative but my discussions with other Nigerians leading to the drafting of this bill, had these two concerns feature more frequently if not prominently. Well, HIV tests are already free of charge, so too the drugs. Tests in Government hospitals are generally cheap for several other ailments and if we were to have a law on compulsory testing, we would appropriate more monies for the equipping of Government hospitals, sick bays and test centres so that they are able to carry out the tests for ailments that the ministry of health requires compulsory free tests for. The cost on Government in the long run will be cheaper.

The pressure on our local currency will also be lessened because people will discover any ailments or warning signs early and will not have to travel abroad to seek care over ailments that have advanced due to late detection.

Does the requirement that every Nigerian go for periodic medical tests invade anyone's privacy? Absolutely not, as the results of such tests will be kept confidential as is currently the case. Indeed, even as we debate this, there are hundreds of thousands of Nigerians who are required by firms and other agencies recruiting for Staff, to first carry out some of these tests. And these applicants have usually carried out such tests. No problems of invasion of privacy there even as some of those firms base their final decision to recruit or not recruit, on the outcome of such tests. In this case, under this law for which support is canvassed, only the patient knows their result; the only information shared is whether or not, an individual carried out the required tests. It is forbidden for the result of that test to be shared with anyone. Emphasis is only on the status of test which includes: "tested" or "not tested".

In the end, Mr Speaker, My Honourable Colleagues, this is a health awareness bill with replete benefits for the tested and for the country. I believe that, we must evolve a system that compels free medical tests for Nigerians else we will end up with a Nation living on drugs that could have been avoided, deaths that could have been averted, costs that could have been lower. To do nothing is not an option. To trigger a discussion on this is one of our patriotic duties to our people.

Thank you for your time, Mr Speaker and My Honourable Colleagues.