

"WEALTH SHALL REACH EVERYONE"

Or so was declared by the Hon. Minister of Finance Prof. Edward Scicluna during the speech relating to the Malta Budget 2017. For this editorial, we shall place it within the context of another well-known quote, attributed to Publius Vergilius Maro, commonly known as Virgil, one of the greatest Roman poets... "the greatest wealth is health"...

First of all, it should be kept in mind that the proposed expenditure for health in 2017 is set to be €517 million, representing 13% of the total budget. The following is a summary of the budget proposals for 2017:

- A project relating to a hospital specialising in the treatment of mothers and children is set to kick-start.
- Additional anti-diabetic medicines will be introduced in the government formulary. Furthermore, all patients suffering from Diabetes Mellitus Type 1 will now benefit from up to four blood glucose test strips per day, irrespective of age [as per DH Circular 442/2016 issued on 2 November]. An unspecified amount of glucose sticks will also be given for free to Type 2 diabetes patients.
- Diabetic patients who have the schedule V card [yellow card] will benefit from free dental care, subsidies on reading glasses and free access to antibiotics. This would address the abrupt removal of such benefits from diabetic patients by the previous administration.
- A reform in the schedule II card [pink card] medicinal entitlement is also being proposed.
- A public consultation will be carried out on the feasibility of workers using their sick leave to care for their sick children [this was actually a 2013 electoral pledge of the current administration but to date, this has not been implemented].
- Special medical paid leave over and above statutory sick leave will be introduced for employees diagnosed with cancer and undergoing treatment. In addition, Prof. Edward Scicluna stated that more anti-cancer medicines will be added to the government formulary.

- A regional hub offering primary health services is planned at the former Pace Grasso ground in Paola [this was also pledged in the Malta Budget 2016].
- A plan on how to employ a public-private partnership [PPP] model for the upgrading of Mount Carmel Hospital and the building of a new hospital for acute psychiatric care will be launched next year.

It goes without saying... if the government talks the talk and walks the walk, this would translate into a positive budget.

However, at this stage it is also important to note the unprecedented drive by the government to develop PPPs, also within the health sector through Projects Malta [www.projectsmalta.com]. Although PPPs within the health sector have been initially floated by the Nationalist party through the devolvement of surgical operations to the private sector and provision of beds to the elderly, the current administration has further expanded such PPPs to also include foreign participation and investment in the running of state hospitals [as well as in the provision of education pertaining to medicine]. More specifically, I am referring to the PPP relating to Karen Grech Hospital, St Luke's Hospital and Gozo General Hospital between the Maltese government and Vitalis Global Healthcare [VGH]. The concession of these three hospitals to VGH is for 30 years and under the agreement reached earlier on this year, the government will buy a number of beds to be used by the public healthcare service from VGH. It has been reported that this will cost the government at least €55 million annually for medical services that are currently offered through the national health service.

As I said before, we are breaking new grounds. If indeed this and similar PPPs actually pay off, it will give a new meaning to "Wealth shall reach everyone". However, at this stage, only time will tell... ❄

Ian Ellul



Cover: On 3 May 1783 the foundation stone for St Julian Hospital was laid in Victoria, Gozo. This hospital accommodated 50 patients and received unmarried pregnant mothers. It also provided foundling facilities. It ceased to function in 1864, becoming the Gozo Seminary in 1866. The Gozo Seminary is currently celebrating its 150th anniversary.

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Editor-in-Chief: Dr Wilfred Galea
Managing Editor: Dr Ian C Ellul
Sales & circulation Director: Carmen Cachia

Email: mpl@thesynapse.net
Telephone: +356 21453973/4

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