

## Paying for public health

Written by Taipei Times Editorial  
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Premier Wu Den-yih (吳登毅) declared on Monday that the government would not raise National Health Insurance premiums for the time being, dismissing Department of Health Minister Yaung Chih-liang's (楊志良) comments over the past few weeks that the department would raise premiums this year — possibly before the start of the Lunar New Year holiday.

Criticizing the shortcomings of the DOH's premium adjustment plan, Wu instructed the department to review its plan, provide more details on remedying the insurance system's financial woes and ensure that at least half of the population be spared from the planned premium hike. Wu also reminded Yaung to refrain from making public comments before a policy is finalized.

For weeks, Yaung had talked about hiking premiums to help resolve the National Health Insurance Program's NT\$60 billion (US\$1.88 billion) deficit. The plan met with wide opposition, however, with many criticizing the government for lacking sensitivity to the plight of the public as the nation struggles to recover from a recession.

Yaung has said the proposal would better address premium payments by different income levels by lowering the insurance premium rate for the bottom 25 percent of the wealth pyramid to 4.5 percent, while raising the rate for those in the top 25 percent to 5.5 percent. Other than telling the public to cough up more money, however, isn't there a better way for the DOH to fill the gap?

It's no secret that Taipei owes the national healthcare system more than NT\$34 billion, while Kaohsiung owes NT\$16 billion — which has taken a heavy toll on the national system. While the Kaohsiung City Government has proposed paying the central government by installment, the Taipei City Government has refused to pay its debt. Wouldn't it make more sense for the DOH to collect the debt owed by these local governments before going after the public's hard-earned money?

Maybe Yaung has forgotten his promise when he assumed the DOH post last August. "The Taipei City Government must pay its debt or the National Health Insurance's finances will collapse sooner or later," he said at the time, adding that the city's debt was the bureau's biggest problem.

Wu's intervention was welcomed as he asked the DOH to thoroughly assess ways to reform the insurance system and seek other ways to resolve its financial problems before forcing the public to cover its debts.

The premier's statement should be read carefully, however, because he did not promise that there would be no increase in the insurance premium, but rather that the rate adjustment would be put off "for the time being."

With the month-end's legislative by-elections looming, a number of Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) legislators had slammed Yaung's planned premium hike, saying it would hurt the party's

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electoral showing. One can't help but wonder then if the premier's announcement of a temporary halt in plans to raise premiums was done out of concern for public welfare — or the KMT's?

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