Universal Health Coverage: Overview

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Universal health is an emerging new and old concept occupying the front lines in health at local, regional and international levels. The editorial board of this journal, in turn, will be highlighting the ins and outs of this concept and will explore its implementation requirement and coverage in a series of articles. This is the first article reviewing the basics of universal health.

Definition

Universal health coverage (UHC) means that all people and communities can use the promotive, preventive, curative, rehabilitative and palliative health services they need, of sufficient quality to be effective, while also ensuring that the use of these services does not expose the user to financial hardship.

This definition of UHC embodies three related objectives:

1. Equity in access to health services - everyone who needs services should get them, not only those who can pay for them;

2. The quality of health services should be good enough to improve the health of those receiving services; and

3. People should be protected against financial risk, ensuring that the cost of using services does not put people at risk of financial harm.

Historical Basis and Prospects

UHC is firmly based on the WHO constitution of 1948 declaring health a fundamental human right and on the Health for All agenda set by the Alma Ata declaration in 1978. UHC cuts across all of the health-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and brings hope of better health and protection for the world's poorest.

Universal health coverage means that all people have access to the full range of essential health services they need, when and where they need them, without financial hardship.

Currently, at least half of the people in the world do not receive the health services they need. About 100 million people are pushed into extreme poverty each year because of out-of-pocket spending on health. This must change.

To make health for all a reality, we need: (1) individuals and communities who have access to high quality health services so that they take care of their own health and the health of their families; (2) skilled health workers providing quality, people-centred care; and (3) policy-makers committed to investing in universal health coverage.

Universal health coverage should be based on strong, people-centred primary health care. Good health systems are rooted in the communities they serve. They focus not only on preventing and treating disease and illness, but also on helping to improve well-being and quality of life.

WHO's Role

WHO identifies achieving universal coverage as a strategic priority, with the goal of 1 billion more people benefitting from universal health coverage by 2023.

In countries with fragile health systems, like Lebanon, WHO actions focus on technical assistance to build national institutions and service delivery to fill critical gaps in emergencies. In more robust health system settings, the WHO drives public health impact towards health coverage for all through policy dialogue for the systems of the future and strategic support to improve performance.

This work is supported by normative guidance and agreements; data, research and innovation; and leadership in the realms of diplomacy, advocacy, gender equality, health equity and human rights, multisectoral action, and finance.

UHC does not mean free access to every possible health service for every person. Every country has a different path to achieving UHC and deciding what to cover based on the needs of their people and the resources at hand. It does, however, emphasize the importance of access to health services and information as a basic human right.

2030 Agenda for SDGs

WHO's work is aligned with SDG target 3.8, which focuses on achieving universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all.

Approximately half the world's population lacks access to such essential health services. Therefore, to achieve SDG target 3.8 of Universal Health Coverage for all by 2030, at least 1 billion more people will need to have access to essential health services in each five-year period between 2015 and 2030.

The essence of UHC is universal access to a strong and resilient people-centred health system with primary care as its foundation. Community-based services, health promotion and disease prevention are key components as well as immunization, which constitutes a strong platform for primary care upon which UHC needs to be built.

Can UHC be Measured?

Yes. Monitoring progress towards UHC should focus on 2 things:
• The proportion of a population that can access essential quality health services.
• The proportion of the population that spends a large amount of household income on health.

Together with the World Bank, WHO has developed a framework to track the progress of UHC by monitoring both categories, taking into account both the overall level and the extent to which UHC is equitable, offering service coverage and financial protection to all people within a population, such as the poor or those living in remote rural areas.

WHO uses 4 categories of services as indicators of the level and equity of coverage in countries:
(1) Reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health
(2) Infectious diseases
(3) Non-communicable diseases
(4) Service capacity and access

Each country is unique, and each country may focus on different areas, or develop their own ways of measuring progress towards UHC. But there is also value in a global approach that uses standardized measures that are internationally recognized so that they are comparable across borders and over time.

Conclusion

Primary Health care is the recommended approach to reach the target of UHC. It is about providing whole-person care for health needs throughout life, not just treating a set of specific diseases. UHC emphasizes not only cohort services are covered, but also how they are funded, managed and delivered and that is the crux of the matter. To what extent Lebanon is progressing in this direction? Subject of the next article.