

Universal coverage brings the hope of better health and protection from poverty for hundreds of millions of people, especially those in the most vulnerable situations The World Health Organization, in collaboration with the Ministry of Health of the United Arab Emirates, is holding a regional meeting on accelerating progress towards universal health coverage: global experiences and lessons for the Eastern Mediterranean Region, in Dubai, from 5 to 7 December 2013.

Universal health coverage is emerging as a global health priority which is likely to occupy a significant place in any future global development agenda.

Universal health coverage means that all people have access to good quality health care, without running the risk of financial ruin. This means without having to pay from their own pocket excessive amounts that would either limit their spending on other essential services or push them into poverty. Universal health coverage focuses on all types of health service and not just treatment.

The focus on universal health coverage is not new. The aspiration goes back to the WHO Constitution of 1948 and the Alma-Ata Declaration of 1978. However, the world is not there yet. Every year, millions of people in the world and in the Eastern Mediterranean Region are still deprived of health care, and millions others experience financial hardship because of the way health services are organized, delivered and financed.

Recently, the move towards universal health coverage has gained momentum. It was the focus of many global reports. The subject was also presented before the last two sessions of the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean. Having a comprehensive vision, evidence-based strategy and a well-laid out roadmap, and associated framework of action,

remain essential for making progress towards universal health coverage.

The Dubai meeting brings together high-level policy-makers, health professionals, representatives of civil society and development partners from all parts of the world, as well as members of scientific circles, academia and concerned nongovernmental organizations.

The purpose of the meeting is to reflect on the latest thinking with regard to addressing the challenges in pursuing universal health care and to share the lessons learned from countries that have succeeded in reforming their national health systems so as to move towards universal health coverage.

At the opening of the meeting Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, reiterated the importance of the meeting and its expected results: "we will discuss the strategic roadmap that was endorsed by the Regional Committee and how to implement it through a framework for action in the Region. This will then need to be followed by development of country-specific roadmaps, starting with generating evidence and engaging in national policy dialogue".

"In some low-income countries in the Region, people still pay for more than 70% of health expenses out of their own pocket. The high share of direct payment limits people's access to much needed health services and exposes those in need of health care to a higher risk of financial catastrophe and impoverishment. It is estimated that each year, up to 16.5 million people in the Region encounter financial ruin, and up to 7.5 million individuals become poor due to out-of-pocket payments for health services", the WHO Regional Director stressed in his remarks. "While population coverage has reached close to 100% for nationals in several high-income countries of the Region, the coverage of non-nationals has yet to reach the same level. For most middle-income countries the population coverage ranges between 40% and 90%, whereas it continues to lag at around 25% for low-income countries."

"Solutions to address these challenges need to be identified and adapted to country needs," Dr Alwan added. He stressed the importance of political commitment to universal health coverage by: providing a national vision, strategy and roadmap; devising evidence-based health care financing strategies; expanding the provision of integrated people-centred health services; and progressively expanding coverage to all population groups.

Advancing the achievement of universal health coverage also requires the availability of the necessary health workforce; the accessibility of essential medicines and technologies; the presence of good governance and leadership; the provision of good quality services; and the production of appropriate information for decision-making.

The challenges and opportunities for universal health coverage have been found to be common to all countries in the Region, although to varying extent, which reflects the need for efforts to enhance universal health care across the entire Region.

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