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Prioritize Universal Health Coverage: WHO

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Universal health coverage (UHC) is a flagship programme of WHO in the Region since 2014



The World Health Organization has called upon countries in its South-East Asia Region to step-up efforts towards universal health coverage, to provide quality health services to all people when and where they need them, without having to suffer financial hardship.

Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh, Regional Director of WHO South-East Asia said, “Universal health coverage is central to improving health and well-being – a fundamental human right. It is also imperative for a country’s well-being as healthier populations create more productive economies.

Universal health coverage (UHC) is a flagship programme of WHO in the Region since 2014. In recent years, all Member States have taken several initiatives which have helped improve access to essential health services. However, challenges remain.

Nearly half of the WHO South-East Asia Region’s population still lacks full coverage of essential health services. Significant inequalities persist. Poorer people, and those in rural areas, have lower access than richer people, and those living in urban areas.

Some 65 million are pushed into extreme poverty, mainly due to paying out-of-pocket for medicines, especially for non-communicable diseases such as heart disease, diabetes etc, and other common ailments.

Dr Khetrapal said, “More efforts are needed to increase human resources for health, enhance skills of health workers and aid staff retention in rural and hard-to-reach area, to ensure quality health services are available for everyone, everywhere.”

Health services must be planned around the needs of the people, she said, highlighting that by 2020 more of the Region’s population will be over 60 than under-five. Hence, ageing population, reversing the growing burden of non-communicable diseases, and early detection and timely treatment of infectious diseases, should be the focus of frontline services.

Increasing access to quality and affordable essential medicines is also fundamental. Paying out-of-pocket for medicines is the leading cause of financial hardship from health care spending in this region, the Regional Director said.

UHC includes the full spectrum of essential, quality health services, from health promotion to prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliative care.

Ensuring universal health coverage will help strengthen health security by making it easier to contain the spread of infectious diseases and respond effectively to natural disasters that the WHO South-East Asia Region is prone to.

Countries in the Region have committed to monitor who is not being covered by health services and why, and review annually progress on UHC and SDG3 health goal until 2030.

UHC is feasible and can be achieved progressively, sometimes with rapid, ground-breaking strides; sometimes via gradual though crucial reform, the Regional Director said.