

Make universal health coverage a reality: WHO

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"Health is critical to development. Access to safe, affordable and good quality health services enables people to be more productive and active contributors to their families, communities and nations," Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh, regional director, WHO South-East Asia Region, said at the WHO Regional Committee meeting held in Dili, Timor-Leste.

Making effective healthcare services accessible to people, wherever they live, and whether they are rich or poor, is a must.

It makes commitments to a fairer society real, and will facilitate sustainable development, she said.

Universal health coverage (UHC) figured prominently at the five-day Regional Committee meeting between 7 - 11 September, attended by Health Ministers and high-level ministerial delegations of all 11 countries of WHO South-East Asia Region.

WHO emphasized that action for UHC needs to take into account the changing health needs.

With the increase in non-communicable diseases and the rise in numbers of the elderly, often with multiple health conditions, a new thinking is needed on ways to deliver health services.

"We need to learn more about new service delivery models that aim to give people access to the care they need, when they need it, without suffering financial hardship. The question is how well they are working," said Dr Khetrpal Singh.

The ways to achieve UHC are becoming clearer. The number of poor people paying out of their own pocket for care when they are sick needs to be reduced as this increases their hardship.

Governments need to invest more into strengthening their health workforce which is key to expanding quality health services.

And improved delivery of services needs to happen in parallel with improved financing if real progress on UHC is to be made, Dr Khetrpal Singh said.

Patient safety is another area central to advancing UHC. People will not use services they think are unsafe.

UHC is the hallmark of a government's commitment to improve the well-being of all its citizens.

Progress towards UHC will be gradual, but it is possible from any starting point.

Though countries in the Region have been making efforts, a lot more needs to be done, Dr Khetrapal Singh said.

UHC is a priority area for WHO support to countries in South-East Asia Region in the coming years.