

Leave no one behind, make Universal Health Coverage a reality: WHO

01 April 2016 | News | By BioSpectrum Bureau

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Countries in the Region need to take urgent and concerted efforts to make Universal Health Coverage a reality and thereby promote wellbeing for all at all ages.

"Universal Health Coverage (UHC) means that all people, however rich or poor, and wherever they live, are able to access the health care they need without incurring financial hardship. We must make UHC a reality and ensure that no one is left behind," Dr Poonam Khetrpal Singh, regional director, WHO South-East Asia said at the beginning of a three-day meeting on 'Health, the SDGs and the role of Universal Health Coverage'. At the meeting, health ministers and experts from across the Region are discussing ways to accelerate health coverage and attain the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing for all at all ages.

Dr Khetrpal Singh emphasized four ways that countries can increase health coverage and progress in their journey toward achieving UHC. "First, access to quality frontline health care is essential. Quality frontline services enhance equity. Second, a well-trained, highly motivated health workforce must be created."

"Third, we must reduce out-of-pocket payments. At present out-of-pocket expenditures in the Region account for as much as 70% of all health care spending. This represents a tremendous financial burden for individuals and their families. For many of the poorest it means health care is simply inaccessible."

"And fourth, countries must monitor who is not getting access to care and who is being impoverished as a result of health care costs. Enhancing coverage requires reliable information and an in-depth understanding of such gaps and challenges," Dr Khetrpal Singh said.

Universal Health Coverage underpins the other SDG health targets and is the means by which they can be attained. Enhancing coverage will help reduce maternal, newborn and child deaths; help end the epidemics of AIDS, TB and malaria as well as hepatitis and other communicable diseases; and enhance access to sexual and reproductive health care services. It will also help tackle new areas of focus in the Region, including alarming rises in non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension, as well as multi-sectoral issues such as antimicrobial resistance.

"The SDGs provide an opportunity - and an obligation - to make further gains in our public health mission. The goals will not be achieved if everyone relies on 'business as usual,'" said Dr Khetrpal Singh. In September 2015, following extensive global consultation, the 193 Member States of the United Nations adopted the SDGs. The SDGs aim to encourage an integrated approach to sustainable development, with a focus on the most vulnerable.