



Increase investment in primary healthcare by 1% of GDP, says WHO

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Governments around the world should invest significantly more in primary healthcare, the World Health Organization has said in a new report.¹

The report coincides with a high level meeting of the United Nations on 23 September on universal health coverage, a system where all people get the healthcare they need without financial hardship. The meeting, the first of its kind, is billed by the UN as “an opportunity to mobilise the global community and secure political commitments.”

WHO officials said that this is not just important for people in developing countries, but for poor people in all countries.

“The good news is that all around the world, across all income groups, health services have improved,” said Peter Salama, head of the universal health coverage division at WHO, at a press conference to announce the report. The gains are primarily attributable to greater access to treatment for infectious diseases, and improvements in access to reproductive, maternal, and child health services.

“Unfortunately, the rate of progress is declining in relationship to matters such as coverage of non-communicable diseases, the limitation of health systems, and the fact that low income countries are falling tragically behind,” he said.

Recommendations for progress include:

- Every country should “immediately allocate or re-allocate at least an additional 1% of gross domestic product (GDP) to primary healthcare”
- “Data gaps” on the availability and cost of health services in most countries need to be filled
- Healthcare services in wealthier countries need to become more efficient, and focus more on those at the bottom of the income scale

- Poorer countries need comprehensive reform of service delivery and health financing.

A constant theme throughout the report is the need to focus on primary healthcare.

WHO is calling for a worldwide increase in expenditure of \$370bn (£297bn; €336bn)—“only about a 5% increase” beyond what is currently spent.

A declaration supporting universal health coverage has been agreed upon in advance and is expected to be approved at the meeting. It’s an 80 point plan that reaffirms the right to healthcare for all, and calls for increased commitments, including the across-the-world 1% GDP increase in healthcare spending recommended in the WHO report.

“A global political declaration is a necessary but insufficient step,” said Salama. “We need to see the commitments turned into action at the country level.”

Catarino Carvalho, speaking as a member of the advisory group to Civil Society Engagement Mechanism for UHC2030 (a network of close to 500 member organisations in more than 75 countries) says they’d like more concrete commitments from the meeting than what’s laid out in the declaration. They’re particularly disappointed that a plan to request that all governments put at least 5% of GDP into healthcare was dropped. But the declaration is a start, they say, and can be used as a basis for post-meeting advocacy.

1 World Health Organization. Universal health coverage report. September 2019. www.who.int/healthinfo/universal_health_coverage/report/2019/en

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