

The Role of Self-Care in Universal Health Coverage

What is UHC, and why is it important?

Universal health coverage (UHC) ensures all people, everywhere, can access quality essential health services with financial protection. It is firmly rooted in the human right to health and requires strong political leadership. Because affordable, accessible, quality health services unlock people's potential, UHC is one of the smartest investments countries can make. And nearly all countries, including low income countries, have the capacity to mobilise the resources required to achieve UHC. Achieving UHC is essential for inclusive development, prosperity, gender equality and fairness.¹

Overarching principles of the UHC Movement¹

- 1) **Ensure Political Leadership Beyond Health** – Commit to achieve UHC for healthy lives and wellbeing for all at all stages, as a social contract.
- 2) **Leave No One Behind** – Pursue equity in access to quality health services with financial protection.
- 3) **Regulate and Legislate** – Create a strong, enabling regulatory and legal environment responsive to people's needs.
- 4) **Uphold Quality of Care** – Build high-quality health systems that people and communities trust.
- 5) **Invest More, Invest Better** – Sustain public financing and harmonise health investments.
- 6) **Move Together** - Establish multi-stakeholder mechanisms for engaging the whole of society for a healthier world.

What can the private sector do?

- The sustainable development goals (SDGs) and specifically SDG 17, call for cooperation, collaboration and partnership between government, civil society and businesses.
- The private sector's role in health care is growing because it offers solutions to many challenges that have a negative impact on health systems including budgetary constraints, increases in disease burden (particularly in relation to noncommunicable diseases), demographic shifts including ageing, lack of opportunity for education leading to gender inequality and poor health literacy, including wrong 'traditional' practices or misbeliefs, population displacement and political and economic instability.

¹ <https://www.uhc2030.org>

Why should self-care be part of UHC?

Self-Care is...

'the ability of individuals, families and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and to cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a healthcare provider'²

Self-care is essential to general health and well-being at every stage of life. Integrating self-care into UHC is essential because it can improve health outcomes and reduce the current burden placed on healthcare systems:

Cost savings

- According to WHO, self-care will ease the burden on overstretched health systems, reduce costs and increase the effectiveness of care, all of which contribute to achieving UHC.
- The cost savings associated with self-care are beneficial to the whole of society – to the patient, the healthcare system, and the broader economy:
 - *Europe*: moving 5% of prescribed medications to non-prescription status across Europe would result in estimated total annual savings of more than EUR 16 billion³
 - *United States*: Every \$1 spent on Over the Counter (OTC) medicines saves the US healthcare system more than \$7 dollars.⁴
 - *Latin America*: \$3 billion are used in the treatment of non-serious conditions by Public Health Systems.⁵

What about out of pocket expenses?

- Individual out-of-pocket expenses incurred in relation to OTC products including self-medication, vitamin supplements, and medical devices, varies across regions according to income levels. Effective deployment of OTC products can have positive consequences on treatment costs particularly in regions where public health systems lack capacity, combined with the high costs of private physician appointments:
 - *Latin America*: certain treatment costs with OTCs are 97% cheaper than public or private hospital treatment⁶
 - *Europe*: in the EU, oral diseases account for around 5% of public health spending. Much of the oral disease burden is preventable through effective, regular oral hygiene measures. For instance, untreated dental decay in permanent teeth is the single most prevalent non-communicable disease in Europe. Therefore, oral health products represent high societal value.⁷
- Individual out of pocket expenses related to purchasing OTC products need to be considered within a broader outlook on cost, bearing in mind the economic value of time saved as opposed to simply considering the costs borne by an individual. The responsible use of OTC products for treatable conditions has a significant impact on reducing costs associated with productivity and opportunity losses, saving money and time associated

² <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/self-care-interventions/questions-answers-self-care.pdf?ua=1>

³ Joshua Noone & Christopher M. Blanchette (2017): The value of self-medication: summary of existing evidence, Journal of Medical Economics, DOI

⁴ The Value of OTC Medicines to the United States, IRI, Mar. 2019

⁵ <https://www.infoilar.org/teste/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/BROCHURE-VALOR-AUTOCUIDADO-ILAR.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.infoilar.org/teste/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/BROCHURE-VALOR-AUTOCUIDADO-ILAR.pdf>

⁷ <http://www.oralhealthplatform.eu/our-work/the-state-of-oral-health-in-europe/>

with physician appointments. Recent analysis focusing on data in Italy has demonstrated that 34.2 million GP visits could be avoided, creating opportunity costs equal to 706 million Euro.⁸

- Ultimately, encouraging individuals to take increased ownership for their health promotes the efficient use of limited healthcare resources. In the case of OTC medicines, this also includes the ability to choose from different options at different price points; OTCs provide access where a healthcare professional may not be available; OTCs are an elective option by the purchaser; and OTCs costs are countered by the value of the time saved by the purchaser.

Response to a changing environment

- The estimated shortage of 12.9 million healthcare workers by 2035, and an estimated 1 in 5 of the world's population now living in humanitarian crises, point to the urgent need to find innovative strategies that go beyond a conventional health sector response.²
- The rapid evolution of technology is transforming healthcare. New diagnostics, devices, drugs and digital health are all transforming how patients and health systems interact.
- Healthcare will increasingly be delivered beyond hospital walls, reaching more people regardless of location/region, with the use of telehealth. The World Health Assembly Resolution on Digital Health unanimously approved by WHO Member States in May 2018 demonstrated a collective recognition of the value of digital technologies to contribute to advancing universal health coverage (UHC) and other health aims of the SDGs.⁹ Although still in its infancy, studies have shown that early adopters of telehealth have been satisfied overall with virtual visits and noted that their care was tailored to their unique health needs. Patients located in rural areas reported savings from travel costs and lost wages. A majority of respondents preferred telehealth to in-person visits.¹⁰

Increased individual empowerment

- The value of self-care goes beyond its impact on resource constraints. Self-care interventions give users greater choice, access, control, satisfaction and affordable options to manage their healthcare needs. Self-care can recognize the strengths of individuals as active agents in their own health care, and not merely passive recipients of health services:
 - In 2015, a study in Scotland¹¹ observed that the simple measure of raising awareness of symptoms and ailments suitable for self-management might help reduce healthcare-seeking behavior
- Educating and enabling individuals to optimize their health by managing common conditions through preventative self-care strategies empowers them to become better self-managers of their own health, making appropriate choices for themselves and their families:
 - The world's largest search engine estimates 80% of people carry out searches before attending primary care physicians. NHS Choices in the UK, the NHS's online public information service, has seen traffic grow from 1m visitors a month to 55m

⁸ *The Economic Impact of a Switch From Prescription-Only to Non-prescription Drugs in Italy* (2018). *Frontiers in Pharmacology*

⁹ *WHO Guideline: recommendations on digital interventions for health system strengthening* (April 2019)

¹⁰ Powell, R. E., Henstenburg, J. M., Cooper, G., Hollander, J. E., & Rising, K. L. (2017). Patient Perceptions of Telehealth Primary Care Video Visits. *Annals of family medicine*, 15(3), 225–229. doi:10.1370/afm.2095

¹¹ Shona Fielding et al: Estimating the burden of minor ailment consultations in general practices and emergency departments through retrospective review of routine data in North East Scotland; *Journal of Family Practice* April 2001

- across the last five years. NHS Choices tapped into an unmet need for authoritative, reliable, structured medical content.
- Early on, the research team at NHS Choices was able to identify the original mission to provide data on the quality of NHS primary and secondary care services was actually secondary to the high demand from women users looking for care information for themselves, their children, husband and parents.¹²
 - In line with this individual empowerment, healthcare professionals (including pharmacists) continue to have a pivotal role to play in the self-care continuum by guiding individuals to appropriate self-care products and interventions, which, in turn, reduces the number of non-critical doctor consultations and directs patients to medical practitioners when a more severe condition is suspected.
 - In the United States alone, primary care physicians estimate that 10 percent of visits to their offices could have been avoided by using OTC medication, and 92 percent of physicians agree that OTC medications are effective and appropriate for first line of treatment¹³

Our Key Asks for Self-Care in the UHC Movement

1) Integrate self-care as a building block of UHC

- Effective self-care needs to be integrated into health systems to address individuals' health needs over the course of their lives, delivering better health outcomes, and improved quality of care. This will help achieve UHC, health-related SDGs and cost savings to health systems.
- Self-care contributes to healthcare by enhancing health literacy, empowering individuals and lowering pressure on health systems.

2) Increase focus on health promotion and prevention as a core priority of UHC

- Strengthen prevention and control of diseases to reduce morbidity and premature deaths (reducing demand on health services and enabling effective UHC implementation), to improve quality of life.
- Self-care is essential to move the healthcare system from disease management (sick care) to protecting health (health care), by encouraging individuals to adopt preventive measures and interventions, in the context of minor illnesses or chronic diseases.

3) Increase investment in self-care and NCDs

- Short term investment in self-care to treat minor transmittable diseases that currently put a heavy burden on health care providers can lead to demonstrable long-term savings for governments and healthcare systems across the world. In the United States alone, 10% of visits to the doctor could be avoided by the use of appropriate self-care.⁴
- Control and prevention of minor illnesses through self-care also alleviates the burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). 41 million people lose their lives to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) including cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes and respiratory diseases annually.¹⁴ Children, adults and the elderly are all vulnerable to the risk factors contributing to NCDs, whether from unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, exposure to tobacco smoke or the harmful use of alcohol.³ Failure to act on the prevention and control of NCDs could bring an output loss of approximately USD 47 trillion from 2011 to 2030 globally¹⁵

¹² <https://www.your.md/pre-primary-care-follow-up/>

¹³ <http://overthecountervalue.org/white-paper/#findings>

¹⁴ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/noncommunicable-diseases>

¹⁵ http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Harvard_HE_GlobalEconomicBurdenNonCommunicableDiseases_201.pdf