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HEALTHCARE, MORE RESPONSIVE

What is Universal Health Coverage (UHC)?

Universal Health Coverage (UHC) ensures that all individuals have access to a full range of quality health services without facing financial difficulties.
Key components of UHC include:

- **Access to Care**: Timely access to necessary health services for everyone.

- **Quality Services**: Delivery of effective, safe, and high-quality care.

- **Financial Protection**: Shielding individuals from financial hardship due to medical expenses.

UHC is integral to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted globally in 2015, as a means to promote health equity and social justice.

The Philosophical Underpinnings of UHC

- UHC is grounded in the principle of universal equality, asserting that every individual deserves quality healthcare with dignity.

- However, India's fragmented political and social fabric lacks the egalitarian ethos needed to institutionalize UHC.

- India's intellectual traditions have not effectively translated into a political commitment toward equality in healthcare.

- Achieving UHC requires a political alignment toward justice and equity, emphasizing societal welfare over narrower interests.

Policy Requirements for UHC

1. **Increased Health Funding**:

   - Doubling health expenditure is vital to bridge gaps in resource allocation and to provide comprehensive primary care.

2. **Addressing Social Determinants of Health**:

- Access to clean water, adequate nutrition, sanitation, education, and income security are foundational to better health outcomes.

3. **Human Resource Development**:

   - Adequate training and deployment of skilled personnel at all levels are crucial for system efficiency.

4. **Provider Accountability**:

   - Implementing robust incentive structures to make healthcare providers accountable to the population they serve.

5. **Regulation of the Private Sector**:

   - Oversight mechanisms are necessary to curb exploitative practices and ensure patient safety within the growing private healthcare sector.

Effective UHC demands not just infrastructure but governance, regulatory frameworks, and a proactive state capable of addressing market inefficiencies.

India's Health Achievements and Challenges

Achievements:

- Success in controlling communicable diseases and reducing maternal and infant mortality rates.

- Innovative programs like Ayushman Bharat focus on expanding primary and preventive care.

Challenges:

1. **Epidemiological Transition**:

   - Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer now account for 60% of mortality.

   - These require a shift from episodic care to long-term, preventive, and community-based approaches.

2. **Underfunding**:

   - Public health spending remains stagnant at 1–1.3% of GDP, well below the WHO-recommended 3%.

- This results in subpar public facilities and excessive out-of-pocket expenditures (45–54% of total health expenditure).

3. **Human Resource Constraints**:

   - Widespread vacancies, especially for specialists in Community Health Centres (CHCs), force patients toward expensive private care.

4. **Privatisation and Corporatisation**:

   - The private sector prioritizes profits, often leading to over-diagnosis, unnecessary procedures, and inflated costs.

5. **Erosion of Public Healthcare Access**:

   - Corporate leases of district hospitals limit affordable care for the middle class and dilute government responsibility.

The Path Forward

1. **Increased Investments**:

   - Substantially enhancing health budgets to improve infrastructure, workforce, and service delivery.

2. **Strengthened Governance**:

   - Implementing regulatory frameworks to prevent profiteering and establish accountability mechanisms.

3. **Community Engagement**:

   - Elevating public awareness and encouraging grassroots participation to demand healthcare as a public good.

4. **Focus on Preventive Healthcare**:

   - Emphasizing community-based care to reduce hospitalizations and associated costs.

Constitutional Provisions Supporting UHC in India

1. **Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP)**:

   - **Article 39(e):** Safeguards workers' health.

   - **Article 42:** Advocates humane work conditions and maternity relief.

- **Article 47:** Mandates the state to enhance nutrition and living standards and to improve public health.

2. **Decentralized Governance**:

- Articles 243G empowers panchayats and municipalities to strengthen public health systems.

3. **National Health Policy, 1983**:

- Advocated for "Health for All" through primary healthcare and equitable distribution of resources.

4. **Current Initiatives**:

- Programs like the Ayushman Bharat-Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (AB-PMJAY) aim to expand access to healthcare through publicly funded insurance schemes.

Conclusion

UHC is a feasible aspiration for India, provided there is a realignment of political priorities toward health equity and justice.

- The government must ensure increased funding, regulatory oversight, and accountability mechanisms to uphold healthcare as a universal right.

- Bridging systemic gaps and building consensus around health as a public good is essential to make UHC a reality.
  Without foundational reforms, UHC will remain an ideal rather than an achievable goal.

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