

Universal Health Coverage: Everyone, Everywhere

Obed Ofori Nyarko(BSc)^{1*}; Saabea Owusu Konadu(BSc)^{1*}; Gilda Opoku (BSc)^{1*}; Fiifi Agyeman-Weithey (Bsc)^{1*}; Gwendolyn Adoteye(BSc)^{1*}

¹School of Medical Sciences-Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (SMS-KNUST), Kumasi-Ghana

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AUTHOR DETAILS

Phone: +233 26 935 6693

Email: obednyarko@gmail.com

“Universal Health Coverage (UHC)” describes the situation where all people receive the health services they need, without

difficulties ¹. UHC is to be achieved by the year 2030 as part of the sustainable development goals (SDGs). It does not necessarily mean free coverage for every health interventions regardless of the cost as this is not sustainable ¹.

As part of the twelve sub-objectives of the SDG 3 as pledged by world leaders in 2015, all countries are to achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all. Commitments are required of all relevant stakeholders towards the achievement of UHC. ² UHC can only be achieved via strategic planning by stakeholders.

A lack of controlled population growth and poverty are major threats to UHC ³. The vulnerable (uninsured, the poor, the elderly, children, terminally ill) and dependent are the worst affected by the lack of UHC ⁴. They are deprived of money and easy access to health services that would prevent or manage their diseases. The cost of consultation, medications and transportation to the health facility can be burdensome for the ordinary person. Most of the deadly infectious diseases such as HIV, diarrhoeal diseases, tuberculosis, malaria and the neglected tropical diseases are referred to as diseases of poverty. Sub-Saharan Africa faces a new health challenge in this era of globalization and urbanization; a double burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases. ⁵ This health transition comes with challenges that need to be tackled through health system strengthening at the primary care level. Morbidity and mortality of the working population as a consequence of this burden leads to reduced productivity, which further worsens our economic woes.

UHC will result in reduction in the prevalence of epidemics, poverty, hunger and increase in quality of life, life expectancy and economic growth.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) was established on the principle that all people should be able to realize their right to the highest possible level of health- “Health for all”. The motto of the National Health Insurance Authority (NHIA), Ghana- “Your Access to Healthcare” rightly echoes this. ⁶ The objectives of the NHIA since its inception in 2003 is to attain UHC and to provide access to healthcare services to the persons covered by the scheme. It is also to ensure equity in healthcare coverage, access by the poor to healthcare services and protection of the poor and vulnerable against financial risk. Its vision is to be the model of a sustainable, progressive and equitable social health insurance scheme in Africa and beyond.

According to a study by N.J. Blanchet et al, (2012) the average individuals enrolled in the National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) are significantly more likely to obtain prescriptions, visit clinics and seek formal healthcare when sick and thus those enrolled are more likely to have proper health seeking behaviour. ⁷ The Ghanaian Government’s objective to increase access to healthcare services has at least been partially achieved. This is an enviable feat that other countries in sub-Saharan Africa and the rest of the world can emulate.

Recently, the Ghana Minister of Health launched an improved version of a previously existing health information system known as District Health Information Management System (DHIMS2), for programme tracking and improving data collection, aggregation and analysis. With this and other systems being set up as well as with our communal effort, the goal of universal health coverage by the year 2030 is likely to be realized.

Achieving UHC cannot be done overnight but all countries need to take appropriate steps to hasten it.

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