RESEARCH FOR UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE—THE WORLD HEALTH REPORT 2013

Written by Marie-Paule Kieny

Universal Health Coverage (UHC) is an integral approach to a country’s overall human and economic development strategy. World Health Organization (WHO) Director-General Margaret Chan has described UHC as “the single most powerful concept that public health has to offer,” and the “best way to cement the health gains made during the previous decade.” Its power lies in its contribution to addressing the many challenges countries face—individually and collectively. UHC has been defined in the Bio-20 Political Declaration as being crucial to “enhancing health, social cohesion, and sustainable human and economic development” and has received considerable attention on a global stage, particularly within the debate on the post-2015 development goals.

In August this year, the World Health Report 2013 “Research for Universal Health Coverage” was launched. Therein, UHC has been defined as “ensuring that all people can use the promotive, preventive, curative, rehabilitative, and palliative health services they need, of sufficient quality to be effective, while also ensuring that the use of these services does not expose the user to financial hardship.” The architecture of UHC requires the establishment of a financing system based on equity concerns; a well-functioning primary health care infrastructure with sufficient facilities; an adequate health workforce of the right mix; access to essential medicines and technologies; as well as public health services that promote health and prevent diseases throughout society. With universal health coverage, countries can help ensure that citizens obtain the health services they need without suffering financial hardship when paying for them. However, the gap between the present coverage of health services and UHC remains large and often it is not clear how to fill that gap in every setting and context. Despite a multinational commitment to UHC, there are many unsolved questions on how to provide access to health services and financial risk protection to all people in all settings. Hence, there is a need for research on how to expand health services with limited resources and the WHO has called on countries to continue investing in local research in order to develop a system of UHC tailored to each individual country’s situation. Currently, most research is invested in new technologies rather than in making better use of existing knowledge. Much more research is needed to turn existing knowledge into practical applications. In this context, all countries should be producers as well as consumers of research. A wide range of basic and applied research studies is essential to reach UHC and the process of bringing scientists and policy makers together needs to be accelerated.

The World Health Report 2013 shows how countries—when developing a system for universal health coverage—can use research to determine what health issues should be addressed, how a system should be structured, and how to measure progress according to their specific health situation. It further defines research for UHC as the set of formal methods that turns promising ideas into practical solutions for improving health services, and consequently improving health. Research for UHC must be context-driven and answer the question of how to choose the health services needed in each setting, how to improve service coverage and financial protection, and consequently how to promote, protect, and improve health and well-being. The quantity, quality, and use of disaggregated data is critical to informing the planning process, monitoring, evaluation, and accountability. While the path to universal coverage will be different for all countries, in all cases, countries need to tie their plans to tough, relevant metrics.

The question on how to measure progress toward UHC is particularly important. Many specific indicators, targets, and data sources are already in use and developing countries can especially learn from the experiences to improve the coverage of health services. Second, it argues for closer collaboration between researchers and policy makers. Third, it highlights the necessity to build more research capacity by developing a local workforce of well-trained, motivated researchers. Finally, the report points out that more global and national research networks could better coordinate research efforts by fostering collaboration and information exchange. As the World Health Report 2013 states, “taking a methodological approach to formulating and answering questions is not a luxury but a necessity.”

And there is good news: more research is being done in more creative ways and most low- and middle-income countries now have research foundations to build on. For example, research was crucial in showing that bed-nets reduce child deaths in malaria-prone countries and conditional cash payments increase the use of health care services. During the 2000s, research investment in these countries has grown 5% on average compared to zero growth in high-income countries, and increasingly authors of published research are coming from emerging countries such as China, Brazil, and India. Last but not least, the number of multisectoral partnerships between universities, governments, the private sector, and international organizations has increased significantly in recent years, contributing to the fact that the process of doing research is becoming more robust. However, much remains to be done and the World Health Report 2013 particularly calls for increased national and international investment aimed specifically at improving the coverage of health services. Second, it argues for closer collaboration between researchers and policy makers. Third, it highlights the necessity to build more research capacity by developing a local workforce of well-trained, motivated researchers. Finally, the report points out that more global and national research networks could better coordinate research efforts by fostering collaboration and information exchange. As the World Health Report 2013 states, “taking a methodological approach to formulating and answering questions is not a luxury but a necessity.”

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Dr. Marie-Paule Kieny
Assistant Director-General – Health Systems and Innovation, World Health Organization

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