PM convenes meeting on universal health coverage

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WHO assures its commitment to support India's health coverage goals, commends government's emphasis on public financing

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has convened a meeting to discuss the proposed reforms for achieving universal health coverage as suggested by the High-Level Expert Group (HLEG).

The meeting comes at a time when the World health Organisation (WHO) has reiterated its commitment to help countries reach universal health coverage. "We have been supporting the work of India's High-Level Expert Group tasked with producing a UHC [universal health coverage] strategy. Given the experiences of other countries that have achieved universal health coverage, I am convinced that the broad strategy outlined in this report will be successful and that within the period of 12th Five Year Plan, hundreds of millions of people in India will benefit from access to better health care," Margaret Chan, Director-General of the WHO has said in her letter to the Union Health Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad earlier this month.

"In particular, I would commend your government's emphasis on replacing inefficient and inequitable private financing [notably user fees] with much higher levels of public financing. As the World health report of 2010 demonstrates, this is a vital component of successful universal coverage strategies," Dr. Chan said in her letter. She appreciated the 'free medicine for all through public health facilities' initiatives, along with improved clinical quality standards and oversight.

The universal health coverage strategy with this initiative also makes a perfect sense given India's leading role in supplying quality generic medicines globally, Dr Chan said while assuring of the WHO's commitment to support India's universal health coverage goals.

Scheduled for April 10, officials from the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Planning Commission and members of the High-Level Expert Group that drafted the report on Universal Health Coverage for India, have been invited for the Prime Minister's meeting.

Instituted by the Planning Commission in October 2010, the expert group was mandated to develop a framework for providing easily accessible and affordable health care to all Indians. It was chaired by Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India and its report strongly recommended a re-configuration of the entire health system, where the government will have a major role to play in making health care an entitlement to every citizen.

The group suggested that health care be offered as a National Health Package (NHP), covering all common conditions and high-impact health care requirements including in-patient and out-patient care free of cost.

Health care services

According to the panel, the health care services would be made available through the public sector and contracted-in private facilities (including the non-government organisations and non-profit groups). These service providers would not be allowed to accept any additional payments from individuals or through privately purchased insurance policies for non-NHP services. Private providers opting for inclusion in the universal health coverage system would be reimbursed at standard rates as per levels of services offered to the population, and their activities appropriately regulated and monitored.

While the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare already initiated the scheme of providing free generic medicines to those coming to the public health facilities for treatment, it has some reservations about public insurances scheme as suggested in report of the HLEG as it feels that given the choice of insurance people would still prefer to go to private sector for treatment. Importantly, insurance would not result in any kind of behavioural change that is needed to improve health of the people.

A framework for providing easily affordable health care to all

Health care be offered as a National Health Package