

Palliative care and Universal Health Coverage



What is Universal Health Coverage?

Universal health coverage (UHC) means that all people and communities 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 (World Health Organization).

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What is palliative care?

Palliative care is an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing the problems associated with life-threatening illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other problems, physical, psychosocial and spiritual (World Health Organization).

Serious health related suffering can be addressed.

What is an essential package of palliative care?

The Lancet Commission on Palliative Care and Pain Relief has suggested a comprehensive package of care to be included within UHC packages which is cost-effective and affordable.

It is estimated that 61.5 million people experience serious health related suffering worldwide.

Why should an essential package of palliative care be included within UHC packages?

1. It alleviates suffering

Serious health related suffering can be addressed. Palliative care improves the quality of life of adults and children with life-limiting communicable and noncommunicable conditions including cancer, dementia, COPD, cardiovascular disease and HIV, and supports family members.

2. It is cost effective and affordable

Palliative care is affordable and cost-effective. It reduces unnecessary hospitalizations and expenditures on medications and interventions that are ineffective and may result in needless suffering.

3. It supports those with some of the highest health needs, and those who are particularly vulnerable to catastrophic expenditure on health

Adults and children with palliative care needs often have complex health conditions. These affect their quality of life, as well as household income generation. Out of pocket health expenditure is often highest during serious illness and towards the end of life. This makes households that are already struggling economically particularly vulnerable to catastrophic health expenditures.

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Who should have access to an essential package of palliative care?

It is estimated that 61.5 million people experience serious health related suffering worldwide. Palliative care is beneficial to a broad range of people living with communicable and non-communicable conditions, from children to older persons, as well as their family members. An essential package should be available to all.

What is the impact on outcomes and health systems when palliative care is included in Universal Health Coverage packages?

Where governments have made the political decision to include palliative care within their health care packages, the outcomes are positive both for those living with and affected by life-limiting communicable and non-communicable conditions, and for the health system. People suffer less, health systems are more efficient.

It is important that an essential package of palliative care services is publicly funded as a component of UHC packages.

What does an essential package of palliative care cost?

The cost of implementing an essential package of palliative care in low and middle income countries according to the Lancet commission is about \$3 per capita.

Who should pay for it?

Palliative care worldwide is currently paid for by a variety of methods across public, private and community funding sources. As a crucial part of the spectrum of essential health services of UHC, it is important that an essential package of palliative care services is publicly funded as a component of UHC packages. It is well documented that user fees for health care services have a negative impact on the uptake of services as well as on equitable access. To promote equitable access, palliative care services must be universally available and free of charge.

Who should provide it?

Palliative care services are provided by a range of providers including public, private and community. The provision of palliative care requires a multi-sectoral and multi-professional approach including a range of actors covering health, social, community and family care. Palliative care should be provided not only by specialist services, but must be integrated into primary health care to ensure equitable access for adults and children. Health and social care professionals and community caregivers need to be trained and mentored. The essential package should be publicly funded.

How do we collectively make this happen?



- To promote equitable access, palliative care services must be universally available and free of charge.
- Build public awareness and engagement in palliative care, and strengthen and enable the voice of people, particularly those directly affected by life-limiting conditions, to demand palliative care.
- Pilot and support innovative multi-sectoral programmes to produce the necessary evidence to show how a publicly funded, essential palliative care package can be provided within primary care, and be free at the point of use under UHC.
- Ensure palliative care is part of all training curricula for health and social care professionals and community health workers.
- Build the evidence on what works, the impact of palliative care inclusion in UHC packages, its cost effectiveness and how to measure progress.
- Include patients and families in all activities to achieve palliative care as part of UHC to reflect true and current needs of patients and their families.

Palliative care cannot just be provided by specialist services, but should be integrated into primary health care to ensure equitable access for adults and children.

Further reading

Read the Report by the Lancet Commission: Alleviating the access abyss in palliative care and pain relief – an imperative of universal health coverage. <https://www.thelancet.com/commissions/palliative-care>