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Health research is essential for progress towards universal health coverage

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News release

15 AUGUST 2013 | BEIJING - At the launch of the "World health report 2013: Research for universal health coverage", WHO today called on countries to continue investing in local research in order to develop a system of universal health coverage tailored to each individual country's situation. With universal health coverage, countries can help ensure that citizens obtain the health services they need without suffering financial hardship when paying for them.

Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of WHO, describes universal coverage as "the single most powerful concept that public health has to offer." In launching the "World health report 2013: Research for universal health coverage", Dr Chan says "universal coverage is the best way to cement the health gains made during the previous decade. It is a powerful social equalizer and the ultimate expression of fairness."

The role of research for universal health coverage

The report 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.

The report reveals that, on average, domestic investment in research in low- and middle-income countries has been growing 5% each year. This trend is most visible in emerging economies such as Brazil, China and India, all of which have embraced the concept of universal health coverage.

Universal health coverage is the single most powerful concept that public health has to offer.

Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General

Case studies from many countries demonstrate the importance of local and global research for improving health, ranging from the prevention and control of specific diseases to the better functioning of health systems. The results of these studies emphasize the critical need for research to be carried out locally, where researchers can consider specific factors critical to individual

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countries.

“Research for universal health coverage is not a luxury; rather, it is fundamental to the discovery, development and delivery of interventions that people need to maintain good health,” the report notes.

The growth of health research

The report also shows that more health research is being published as a result of international collaboration. Scientists from low- and middle-income countries are increasingly engaged in these collaborations, although high-income countries continue to play a prominent role in most studies. China is one example: from 2000 to 2010 the global share of Chinese researchers as co-authors on published research increased from 5% to 13%. Brazil, India and other countries have also increased their participation in published research. However, although research is increasing overall, growth is uneven.

“All nations should be producers as well as consumers of research. The creativity and skill of researchers are the backbone of academic and public health programs,” says Dr Christopher Dye, Director, Office of Health Information, HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, Malaria and Neglected Tropical Diseases and lead author of the report. “A wide range of basic and applied research studies is essential to reach universal health coverage, but gaps between knowledge and action are being closed very slowly. We need to accelerate the process of bringing scientists and decision makers together to improve health service coverage.”

Universal health coverage requires a strong, efficient, well-run health system; a system for financing health services; access to essential medicines and technologies, and sufficient well-trained, motivated health workers.

To meet the challenges, WHO encourages international donors and national governments not only to invest in research, but also to support mechanisms for sharing information and data, to strengthen research training and institutions, and to measure progress against their own commitment to achieving universal health coverage.

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