National debate needed on universal health coverage

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Universal health coverage (UHC) has now been widely adopted by Canada and many other developing countries both as a developmental imperative and the moral obligation of a civilised society. India embraced this vision at its independence. However, insufficient funding of public facilities, combined with faulty planning and inefficient management over the years, has resulted in a dysfunctional health system that has been yielding poor health outcomes. India’s public spending on health — just around 1.2 per cent of GDP — is among the lowest in the world.

As the world grapples with the combined challenges of economic slowdown; the increasing globalization of the economic system and of diseases; and growing demands for chronic care, the need for universal health coverage (and a strategy for financing it) has never been greater.

Jan Swasthya Abhiyan called for a national public debate on the proposed universal health care system, saying that such an important issue cannot be rushed through and its various strands need to be understood, discussed and commented upon widely by the people. “Definition of a clear, transparent and time-bound road map for strengthening and expanding the public health system while improving its functioning and accountability; this must include allocation of adequate, and enhanced budgets,” a JSA statement said.

The statement, issued after a two-day meeting of the nation working group meeting to discuss the High Level Expert Group’s report on Universal Healthcare Coverage, said an adequate law must be enacted guaranteeing the right to health, including National and State Health Acts, which would lay down the framework for regulation of the health system, particularly relevant for private medical providers. Providing entitlements must be accompanied by a clear framework for accountability and grievance redressal.