

Comprehensive Services for UHC

As countries in Africa formulate their universal health insurance to support universal health coverage (UHC) the benefit packages provided at each level of care must meet the population needs as broadly and as equitably as possible. Many health systems in Africa are organized into primary, secondary, tertiary and rehabilitative care. For universal access to healthcare to be made possible to all people everywhere, a wide range of services must be provided at the lowest levels of care, strengthened by a robust referral system.

Quality of Care in UHC

While UHC emphasizes **accessibility**, **affordability**, and **equity**, the **quality of care** is a crucial element that is sometimes overlooked or underfunded.

Dimensions of Quality of Care in UHC

Quality of care refers to the degree to which health services for individuals and populations increase the likelihood of desired health outcomes and are consistent with current professional knowledge. In the context of UHC, quality of care must be integrated into the broader framework of universal access. The following are key dimensions to consider:

1. **Effectiveness:** Health services should be based on evidence and should produce the desired health outcomes. For example, offering evidence-based treatments, diagnostic protocols, and preventive measures can improve both individual and public health.
2. **Safety:** Health care systems should prevent avoidable harm to patients. This involves reducing medical errors, ensuring proper hygiene, and providing quality surgical care to minimize risks associated with treatments or procedures.
3. **Patient-Centeredness:** Care should be respectful of, and responsive to, individual preferences, needs, and values. This includes listening to patients, considering their perspectives in treatment decisions, and ensuring that patients' rights are respected.
4. **Timeliness:** Health services should be delivered promptly to avoid delays that might worsen health outcomes. Long wait times for appointments, treatments, or procedures can harm patients, especially in life-threatening conditions.
5. **Efficiency:** Health services should use resources wisely, without waste. This means optimizing the use of personnel, infrastructure, and technologies to provide the best possible care with the least amount of resource expenditure.
6. **Equity:** In UHC, quality should be equitable across different groups, regardless of geographic location, socioeconomic status, gender, or other demographic factors. The system should aim to reduce health disparities and provide equal care to vulnerable populations, including rural, low-income, and marginalized groups.
7. **Integration and Continuity of Care:** UHC should not only provide access to essential services but also ensure that care

is well-coordinated, integrated across different levels (e.g., primary, secondary, and tertiary), and continuous throughout the patient's journey.

Challenges to Ensuring Comprehensive Services and Quality of Care for UHC

1. **Underfunding:**
 - Many countries striving for UHC may face resource constraints. Lack of financial investment in health infrastructure, workforce, and technology can undermine the quality of services, leading to overcrowding, shortages of medical supplies, and poorly trained personnel.
2. **Workforce Shortages and Burnout:**
 - In African countries, there is a shortage of trained healthcare professionals. This can compromise the quality of care provided, as doctors, nurses, and other staff may be overworked, leading to burnout, errors, or insufficient attention to patients.
 - Many African countries also face frequent industrial action from health workers due to poor working conditions, leading to health facilities lacking health workers for periods of time.
3. **Inequities in Access:**
 - Even in systems with universal coverage, there can be disparities in the distribution of healthcare resources. Rural and hard to reach areas, for example, might lack skilled professionals or advanced medical facilities, reducing the quality of care for rural populations.
4. **Lack of Infrastructure:**
 - In many regions in Africa, health systems suffer from outdated or insufficient medical infrastructure (e.g., hospitals, clinics, medical equipment). This can limit the quality of care, particularly in terms of diagnostics, treatment, and emergency services.
 - Poor procurement practices contribute to inadequate infrastructure. For instance, when procurement of diagnostic equipment does not factor in consumables, and maintenance and repair of the equipment, high value equipment that would otherwise be useful lies idle.
5. **Fragmentation of Services:**
 - In some cases, UHC systems may become fragmented, with different providers offering care in silos, making it difficult for patients to receive coordinated treatment. Lack of integration between primary care, specialist care, and mental health services can lead to suboptimal outcomes.
 - Programmatic approaches to healthcare are a significant to fragmentation of healthcare, where patients are only seen for a specific disease area while their other healthcare needs are ignored.

- 6. Health System Corruption and Governance Issues:**
- Corruption, inefficiency, and poor governance can erode the quality of care. Misallocation of resources, favouritism, or lack of transparency can lead to inadequate service delivery, especially for marginalized groups.
- 7. Cultural and Social Barriers:**
- In some regions, cultural attitudes, stigma, or social norms may prevent patients from accessing or seeking the care they need. Even when services are available, quality may be compromised by lack of trust in the system or healthcare professionals.

Strategies to Improve Quality in UHC

To improve the quality of care within UHC systems, several strategies can be implemented:

- 1. Strengthening Health System Capacity:**
 - Increased investment in health infrastructure, including physical facilities, technology, and human resources, is essential. Building and retaining a skilled healthcare workforce is central to improving care quality.
 - Integration of health services is an approach to increasing capacity and making health system savings.
- 2. Ensuring Evidence-Based Practice:**
 - Implementing guidelines and protocols based on best practices and ensuring continuous professional development for healthcare workers can improve care outcomes and reduce errors.
- 3. Universal Health Insurance Coverage:**
 - Expanding coverage to all, including the most vulnerable, ensures that access to high-quality care is not contingent on ability to pay, leading to improved public health outcomes.
 - Pivoting from donor dependence to increased domestic allocation of finances for healthcare can boost both tax funded and citizen contributions-based health insurance coverage.
- 4. Monitoring and Evaluation:**
 - Robust monitoring systems are needed to assess the quality of care and to identify areas for improvement. This includes patient satisfaction surveys, outcome-based measurements, and audits of healthcare facilities.
- 5. Community Engagement and Patient Involvement:**
 - Empowering communities and patients by involving them in decision-making and health system governance

can improve satisfaction and ensure care is more responsive to people's needs.

- 6. Addressing Health Inequities:**
 - To improve equity in care, UHC systems must target underserved populations by offering targeted interventions, mobile clinics, subsidies, and services that are culturally and linguistically appropriate.
- 7. Innovation and Technology:**
 - The adoption of health technology, such as electronic health records, telemedicine, and AI-assisted diagnostics, can improve the efficiency, accessibility, and quality of care, especially in resource-constrained settings.
- 8. Regulation and Accountability:**
 - Establishing strict health system regulations and mechanisms for accountability can help prevent fraud, corruption, and malpractice, which can undermine the quality of care in UHC systems.

In the pursuit of UHC, ensuring comprehensive services and quality of care are important. By focusing on the key dimensions of quality—effectiveness, safety, patient-centeredness, timeliness, efficiency, and equity—governments and health systems can create frameworks that deliver comprehensive, high-quality health services to all, regardless of socioeconomic status or location.

Ultimately, the true success of UHC lies not just in the number of people covered, but in the **value and effectiveness** of the care they receive.

About the Session

This session will bring together distinguished healthcare professionals from the public and private sectors, alongside development partners and other key stakeholders, to explore the gaps, opportunities, and innovative strategies for delivering comprehensive services and ensuring quality care for all.

Expected Outcomes

1. Increased awareness and shared understanding of the importance of aligning UHC strategies with the principles of comprehensive service delivery and quality of care.
2. Identification of key challenges and presentation of innovative solutions and best practices for improving quality of care within UHC frameworks.
3. Actionable policy recommendations and a strategic roadmap for governments and stakeholders to integrate comprehensive service delivery with quality assurance measures into UHC policies.
4. Commitment to continuous collaboration and partnerships between the public and private sectors, international organizations and key stakeholders to enhance quality and accessibility in UHC initiatives.

For partnership opportunities in this conference please email Dr. Daniella Munene, Head of External Affairs at Africa Health Business on: DMunene@africahb.com

