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Poverty not an obstacle to excellent healthcare in Africa: Gates

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Billionaire philanthropist Bill Gates said Sunday that excellent basic healthcare that would prevent easily treatable but deadly conditions was achievable even in Africa's poorest nations.

"The good news about health is that by spending modest amounts on the prioritised areas, you can get phenomenal benefits," he told AFP on the sidelines of the African Union summit in Addis Ababa.

"You don't have to get all the way to middle-income before you can run a great primary healthcare system."

The Microsoft founder mentioned interventions such as vaccines, safe delivery for mothers and the availability of antibiotic drugs as ways to drastically improve health outcomes.

Gates, whose foundation has spent around $15 billion in Africa since 2000, on Saturday took part in the launch of an initiative to increase investment—mainly on the part of governments—in the health sector.

Rwandan President Paul Kagame, who sparked the initiative, called on African nations to put at least 15 percent of their budgets towards healthcare.

In 2016, an average of 7.5 percent of budgets was spent in this sector on the continent, according to AU figures.

Gates noted that while efforts to improve healthcare in Africa have cut child mortality and increased life expectancy, "the numbers are still quite troubling".

According to the AU, more than half of all Africans don't have access to essential healthcare services, 70 percent of people affected by HIV/AIDS live on the continent and infectious diseases eradicated elsewhere remain key causes of mortality.

"If you look at the big killers of children, these are things that we have cheap interventions for, diarrhoea, pneumonia, malaria," said Gates.

"The first 10 percent of spending in rich countries gives you 90 percent of the benefit."

He praised Rwanda, which has achieved universal health care coverage despite being one of the world's poorest countries, as a "fantastic example".

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), Rwanda halved mortality in children under five between 2005-2010, while the mortality rate due to malaria has decreased nearly 85 percent.

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