

# UN chief: Pandemic shows need for universal health coverage

7 October 2020, by Edith M. Lederer

The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the "utterly inadequate health systems" around the world, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said Wednesday in arguing that universal health coverage is essential for nations to deal with future health crises.

He said the failure to respond adequately to the outbreak has claimed more than 1 million lives, infected over 30 million people in 190 countries, wiped out 500 million jobs and is costing the global economy \$375 billion a month. Indicators of human advancement and well-being are going in reverse for the first time since the U.N. started measuring them in 1990, he added.

Guterres said in a video message and policy briefing that COVID-19 has shown the need for universal health coverage, strong public health systems, and emergency preparedness for communities and people everywhere.

"At least half the world's people do not have access to the health services they need," he said. "Some 100 million people are driven into poverty each year by catastrophic health care costs."

The secretary-general noted all countries agreed in 2015 on U.N. goals for 2030 that include working toward universal health coverage, "but we cannot wait 10 years."

"We need universal health coverage, including mental health coverage, now," Guterres said.

According to the new policy paper, "health is a fundamental human right, and universal health coverage is a critical tool for achieving health for all."

"Universal health coverage is defined as a situation where all individuals and communities receive the health services they need without undue financial hardship," it says.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric was asked about the policy paper's release during the U.S. election campaign, where health care and the lack of universal health coverage is an issue because of the nearly 210,000 U.S. deaths and almost 7 million coronavirus infections.

"The report is not linked to the electoral calendar here in the United States," Dujarric said. "It is targeted at every country, and I think we see the world over the issues that arise when people don't have access to health care."

The policy paper also calls for urgent efforts to control further transmission of the coronavirus, including universal provisions for testing, isolating, contact tracing and care, and the protection of other health services during the pandemic.

"COVID-19 is indirectly killing people with heart disease and cancer, as well as those it infects," Guterres said. "And access to mental health services and sexual and reproductive health programs cannot be compromised."

He also called for a huge expansion of access to new rapid diagnostic methods and treatments, and ensuring that future coronavirus vaccines "are a global public good with equitable access for everyone, everywhere."

The lessons learned from the pandemic "call for universal health coverage that ensures equal access to quality health care without financial risks for everyone and that effectively protects societies from another health crisis with its devastating effects on lives and livelihoods," Guterres said.

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