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منظمة الصحة العالمية
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PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT FOR ADVANCING UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE IN THE REGION

Objective of the event

The objective of the event is to highlight the importance of engaging the private health sector to advance universal health coverage in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Background

Despite the importance of the private health sector in advancing universal health coverage it has not been possible, so far, to formulate an evidence-based strategy on harnessing the potential contribution of the private health sector in achieving public health goals in the Region. As a result of the renewed impetus on universal health coverage in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and concerns about patient safety and financial protection there is a need to build the capacity of ministries of health to design, manage, monitor and evaluate public–private partnerships. Without involving the private health sector under a mutually agreed national policy framework and developing effective partnerships universal health coverage will not be easily achieved in most countries.

To advance towards universal health coverage in the Region engaging the private health sector is essential. In most countries, the private sector is a dominant outpatient health services provider, yet its role and workings are not fully understood. It is poorly regulated and existing partnerships between public and private sectors are not adequately organized. In addition, the private health sector has grown with minimal policy direction and is hardly a part of governments' health sector planning. The ever growing private sector in the Region remains an untapped resource.

The typology and role of the private sector in health is wide ranging. For-profit and not-for-profit private sectors are a macro dichotomy but with many shades of grey within and between these categories offering tremendous services and contributions but, at the same time, posing huge challenges of various kinds. The private sector in health is very active in service provision (both ambulatory and hospital), medical education, infrastructure, medicines and health technology research and development, production and supply. The informal health sector is also another huge area where the private sector plays a major role and is less understood and least regulated.

To formulate an evidence-based strategy for the private health sector, the WHO Regional Office has undertaken several assessments and conducted capacity-building workshops. Despite its potential, the role of the private health sector is not well defined, its capacities are poorly understood, and practices are not monitored. Essential information on private sector composition, service coverage, quality and pricing is limited. The range of services provided is variable, standards are inadequate and inconsistent, regulation is poor and there is insufficient information on the financial burden of these services to users. Assessments undertaken in countries of the Region have found that while a number of laws and regulations exist to regulate the private sector, many are outdated and inadequate to effectively address the current challenges and problems. A weak regulatory framework coupled with poor enforcement pose serious challenges to patients and impede the development of the health system in most countries of the Region.

Unclear vision, lack of accreditation programmes, duality of practice, commercial drive, uncontrolled sale and irrational prescription and use of medicines and medical technologies, free sale of antibiotics resulting in antimicrobial resistance, inadequate regulatory control on quality and limited availability of data are some of the key challenges. Enforcement of service delivery quality standards in the private sector is among the biggest challenges faced by governments and ministries of health.

A recent analysis showed that the proportion of private sector outpatient services used by the population in the Region ranges from 33% to 86%. The proportion of private clinics in Group 1 countries ranges from 15% to 88%; and varies from 5% to 78% in Group 2 countries; and from 20% to 90% in Group 3 countries. In Group 2 countries 7% to 83% of hospital beds belong to the private sector. The percentage of private sector services used by the poorest quintile ranges from between 11% and 81%. Therefore, strengthening public–private partnership for service provision could have a substantial impact on making progress towards universal health coverage.

Way forward and expected outcomes

The expected outcome of this session is to raise awareness of the importance of engaging the private health sector in advancing universal health coverage in the Region and discuss the possibility that a formal technical discussion on the role of the private health sector in advancing universal health coverage take place at the Sixty-fifth Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean in 2018.