Accelerating Health Equity Post 2015

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Healthcare Information for All – from vision to reality

Prince Mahidol Award Conference is an annual international conference focusing on policy-related health issues of global significance. The conference is hosted by the Prince Mahidol Award Foundation, the Ministry of Public Health Thailand, Mahidol University, and other global partners. It is an international policy forum for seeking international perspectives on important global health issues.

[Source: from the conference website]

We enter 2015, not only reflecting on what we have achieved through the Millennium Development Goals, but also eagerly awaiting consensus on the new Sustainable Development Goals. We are also reminded of what united the international community in the years approaching 2000 – ‘reducing inequality’. The theme of this year’s Prince Mahidol Award Conference was, therefore, particularly apposite: ‘Global Health Post-2015: Accelerating Equity. Across three days, we heard several passionate speeches focusing on, the delivery of a post-2015 development agenda that centred on equity, whilst achieving an ambitious health goal. Universal Health Coverage (UHC) – put forward by WHO – was identified as “the single most powerful concept that public health has to offer”, and is also aligned firmly with the human right to health.

At a side event hosted by WHO, ‘Equitable Access to Health Information – at the heart of UHC’, we deliberated on the components required to achieve the ambition of UHC. A central component, aside from health financing, is a health system, which in its simplest form, consists of all organisations, the
services provided and people whose primary interest is to restore or maintain health. A key component of this structure is a well-performing health workforce, which is able to work in a responsive, fair, and efficient manner to achieve the best health outcomes possible, given the available resources and circumstances. Of all the basic needs of health workers, the need for reliable, appropriate health care information and knowledge is fundamental.

The global healthcare knowledge system, as we have come to conceptualise it, represents the totality of processes and structures that underlie the production, exchange, availability and use of relevant, reliable health care information, and is dependent on the cooperation of a wide range of professionals, including citizens or representative of civil society, healthcare providers, policy makers, researchers, publishers, information professionals, and systematic reviewers. More and more, we find that this system is not working in many parts of the world, simply because it is poorly understood, unmanaged, fragmented and under resourced. In practice, this is represented by low level awareness of available resources, lack of relevant available information (i.e. not meeting the end users’ needs in terms of integrity, scope, style, language, or format), limited time and incentives to use existing information, and lack of interpretation and critical thinking skills. The consequences of this systemic failure are a global crisis where tens of thousands of women, children and men die every day for the want of simple, low-cost interventions that are often locally available. In the age of ‘big data’, where we are confronted by hugevolumes of both structured and unstructured data that is so large that it is difficult to process. It is becoming increasingly important to understand the context and environment into which information is pushed out into, to ensure that it is not only accessible, but appropriate to the needs of end users. The reality of the ‘information crisis’ has significant potential to reverse many of the gains made towards the MDGs.

Healthcare Information All (HIFA) is a global network, and one such initiative addressing this crisis through constructive collaboration and communication. With a current membership of over 13,000 individuals from a wide range of disciplines, and supported by 2500 organisations, HIFA spans 170 countries. United behind a shared vision where ‘every person and every health worker will have access to the healthcare information they need to protect their own health and the health of those for whom they are responsible’, the network provides a ‘virtual’ platform, consisting of five global discussion forms in three languages, where members share expertise and experiential knowledge to enable better understanding of the health information needs of healthcare providers around the world – and the development of solutions for meeting them. HIFA is powerful social and health professional movement to capture particularly tacit knowledge in addition to the knowledge already available.

Meeting the needs of health care providers is central to the realisation of universal access to evidence-informed healthcare and UHC. By ensuring that other stakeholders take full account of healthcare information needs as a driver for ethical behaviour change, the potential for UHC to move from aspiration to reality based on equity considerations is greatly increased.