Universal health coverage — a cornerstone of the Sustainable Development Goals — is a global call to ensure that every individual is able to obtain good quality health services without facing financial hardship. UHC has received nearly universal support and in 2017, leaders of both the World Bank and World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the achievement of UHC is paramount.

Increasingly, national governments are committing to reaching this goal. In many of these countries, a significant proportion of care is delivered by local private providers. However, governments’ efforts toward universal health coverage tend to focus almost exclusively on the public health sector, often neglecting private care and its potential to expand the availability of vital health care services.

Our Perspective

Merck for Mothers is Merck’s $500 million initiative to help create a world where no woman dies giving life. Our investments in maternal health strengthen health systems so they can meet the demands of universal health coverage.

Merck for Mothers focuses on private care — an often overlooked part of the health system despite offering a significant proportion of care — because we believe that both public and private providers must improve the quality of care they offer to ensure better — and more equitable — maternal health outcomes.

We are working with governments, provider associations and NGOs to help build the capacity of private maternity providers — doctors, nurses, midwives, drug shop owners, community health workers — to consistently deliver high quality health services. Our goal is that all women have a healthy pregnancy and safe childbirth regardless of where they seek care.

These programs are supported by funding from Merck, through Merck for Mothers, the company’s $500 million initiative to help create a world where no woman dies giving life. Merck for Mothers is an initiative of Merck & Co., Inc., Kenilworth, NJ, USA.

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Achieving universal health coverage requires:

- Expanding the availability of health care services
- Making health care more affordable for patients
- Ensuring health care services are high quality

Availability

By integrating local private providers into strategies to achieve universal health coverage, we expand the availability of health services to reach more people.

Availability of reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health (RMNCH) interventions is rising globally, but we still have far to go to achieve universal health coverage. Some indicators, like institutional deliveries, are rising. However, availability of emergency obstetric care is not adequate; for example, median coverage for C-sections remains low at only 6%, well below the WHO-recommended rate of 10-15%.

In many low- and middle-income countries, approximately 40% of women seeking care receive maternal health and family planning services from private health providers. Given the significant role these local providers play, it would be a missed opportunity if health systems failed to integrate them into national efforts to expand maternal health care coverage more broadly.

Merck for Mothers has a long history of advocating for the inclusion of private care in national health strategies in contexts as diverse as India, Uganda, Nigeria and Kenya. To help demonstrate the value of private care in strengthening health systems, we are collaborating with the WHO and Results for Development. These partnerships will generate evidence and guidance for government leaders, policy makers and global development donors on effective strategies to integrate private providers into national health systems.

Affordability

By investing in innovations that encourage women to plan and save for childbirth, we help patients safeguard against catastrophic health expenditures.

Health services must be available and affordable to ensure equitable access. Globally, many countries are putting financing models in place that protect patients from catastrophic health expenditures. Merck for Mothers advocates for including both public and private providers in these financing schemes, such as vouchers or insurance, to help ensure that health care costs are covered wherever women choose to seek care.

However, financing the cost of care will not improve health outcomes if the quality of that care is poor. Merck for Mothers is exploring mobile platforms that help link women to maternal health care services that are both affordable and high quality.
By focusing on quality, we ensure that health services are effective, and that consumers and payors receive better value

Expanding availability and affordability of care without improving quality will not improve population health. In 2016, almost 5 million deaths could have been averted with better quality care. UHC cannot achieve its primary objective of creating better health unless patients have access to services that are high quality.

Unfortunately, in many low and middle-income settings, there is poor quality care in both the public and private sectors. Often, standards for quality maternity care are inconsistent, making it difficult to define and measure quality. Private maternity providers also lack the tools and capacity to improve the quality of care they offer.

To ensure that local private providers deliver quality care and contribute toward UHC, the right incentives need to be in place. Merck for Mothers takes on this challenge by working with partners to streamline quality standards and tools for maternity care and integrate these standards into quality improvement and quality assurance systems.

Patient demand is also important to sustain the delivery of high quality care. When women have information about the quality of care they should receive, they become more informed health care consumers. As a result, they are able to demand quality care and can drive the market to upgrade services. Governments, health care providers and payors have an important role to play in encouraging women’s feedback on the care they receive and holding themselves accountable to deliver better care — a cornerstone of UHC.

Looking ahead, Merck for Mothers will continue to advocate for quality to be at the forefront of the UHC conversation. Quality care is central to our approach to save women’s lives, improve maternal health and ensure more equitable health outcomes for women around the world.

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