

Book Review

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Medicines in health systems: Advancing access, affordability, and appropriate use

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Essential medicines are a vital and important component of the health system and access to medicines has an important role in ensuring universal health coverage. The definition of essential medicines emphasises that they should be available within functioning health systems, be provided along with adequate information, and be available at a cost the individual and the community can afford. Providing affordable, quality health care still remains a challenge for many countries. Universal health coverage (UHC) needs strong, well-functioning health systems, sustainable and equitable methods of health financing, well-trained and motivated health workers, and access to essential medicines.

A recent flagship report from the World Health Organization and Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research examines challenges with regard to access to essential medicines from a health systems perspective, looks at recent developments in this area, and presents suggestions to further strengthen health systems to improve access to essential medicines. Well-constructed tables and diagrams are a feature of the book, which helps to summarise important concepts in the text. Figure 1.1 in chapter 1 beautifully illustrates the interconnectedness of various components of the health system.

The second chapter provides a historical perspective on essential medicines and health systems. Despite the recent emphasis on essential medicines, a significant proportion of the global population especially in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) lacks access to them. In LMICs prescription-only medicines are widely sold without a prescription resulting

in patients taking medicines (self-medicating) without proper instructions and monitoring. Low literacy levels among the global population add to the problem. Figure 2.1 in chapter 2 is useful as it diagrammatically illustrates important milestones in the development of essential medicines and health systems and underlines the close relationship between the two.

Medicines play a vital role in UHC and the authors recommend LMICs use a systems approach, and financing and information levers to achieve UHC goals. Medicines policies have to balance competing interests and objectives ranging from promoting equitable access and low medicine prices, while at the same time ensuring the quality of medicines and supporting innovation and development of them. The authors examine critically various aspects of the healthcare financing schemes in China, Ghana, Indonesia, and Mexico. The report examines how innovation can play an important role in ensuring better access to medicines. Traditionally, profits and revenues from medicine sales have been used to finance research and development (R&D); the report examines approaches that can delink R&D costs from sales revenue. India's open source drug discovery (OSDD) initiative for neglected diseases is mentioned as a good example of public financing of R&D costs. Increasing access to high quality generic medicines can have significant benefits in terms of UHC and improved health. Brazil's initiatives in promoting access to generic medicines are also highlighted.

The report highlights important case studies where market interventions have been used to improve access to medicines in LMICs. Among the case studies mentioned: accredited drug dispensing outlets in Tanzania; using "expert patients" to provide healthcare delivery to diabetics in Cambodia; the antibiotic smart use initiative in Thailand; and the Familia Nawiri social business initiative in Kenya. Social businesses work on the premise of targeting the economically weaker sections of the population and improving their economic status and purchasing power. Improved access to medicines results

in improved health, increased economic activity, and a higher level of income to purchase medicines.

The report's authors highlight three actions to stimulate progress towards UHC and access to medicines. These include: 1) access to medicines and their appropriate use as an explicit focus in strengthening health systems; 2) recognising the needs for transparency and governance in the medicines sector; and 3) building more robust connections between information, medicines, and decision making. The list of references is extensive with many of them being freely accessible through the Internet.

The bright green colour of the cover pages of the book may reflect a commitment towards a greener, more sustainable future. The report was the focus of a recent webinar "Governance of informal medicine markets: Recent findings, future directions" held on 24 September 2014. This report is essential reading to all those committed to promoting access to essential medicines as a basic human right.

About the book:

Bigdeli M, Peters DH, Wagner AK. (eds.) Medicines in health systems: Advancing access, affordability and appropriate use. World Health Organization: 2014. ISBN 978 92 4 150762 2.

The book can be downloaded for free from:

<http://www.who.int/alliance-hpsr/resources/flagshipreports/en/index1.html>.

There are web annexes to each chapter, which are also freely accessible.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that he has no competing interests.
