

Republic of Cyprus

**CYPRUS’ INPUT REGARDING EXAMPLES OF A HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE**

**Universal Health coverage-Human right based upon the values of equality without discrimination**

***Synopsis (prepared by Ministry of Finance)***

Cyprus has since 2019 adopted a general health scheme (GHS) regarding the provision of healthcare services.

The major elements of this scheme are concerned with the following:

1. universal coverage
2. contributions based on income = solidarity
3. financial protection
4. single health fund
5. equal access to health care services
6. improvement of quality
7. free choice of health care provider
8. comprehensive package of services
9. organization of primary care and prevention
10. fast service
11. reduced waiting lists
12. expanded pharmaceutical products
13. >3.000 doctors, 500 pharmacies [[NB: population less than 1million]]
14. > 200 clinical labs, >2.700 hospital beds [[note above]]
15. Transparency

* GHS’ basic principles are based upon:
* Universality, that is meant universal coverage of the population
* Equality that is meant equal access of all beneficiaries to health care services provided
* Solidarity that is meant contributions based on income
* Free choice that is meant the beneficiaries will choose freely their health care providers
* GHS’ beneficiaries are the following:
* Republic of Cyprus citizens who have their permanent residence in the areas where the Government of the Republic of Cyprus exercises effective control
* European Union citizens who have their ordinary residence and either work or have acquired the right of permanent residence in the areas where the Government of Cyprus exercises effective control
* Third-country citizens who have their their ordinary residence or the right for equal treatment in the sectors of social insurance, according to the provisions of Cyprus national law
* Other categories (e.g. refugees)
* The access to health care services is ensured by:
* The registration to GHS and
* Family doctor’s (FD) list. This can be achieved electronically through the beneficiary’s portal on GHS website or when first visit the FD’s office
* The FD is the first point of contact and the health care provider that will guide the patient through the system
* Overall the GHS architecture provides certain benefits to the beneficiaries:
* Univeral coverage
* comprehensive package of services
* equal access to health care services
* solidarity in sharing the financial burden of healthcare expenditure
* financial protection
* free choice of health care provider
* improvement of quality of healthcare services
* prevemtion and detection of diseases and
* E-health

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***Contribution by Ministry of Health***

The Republic of Cyprus fully supports and commends the commitment of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to universal health coverage in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. We recognize the need for access to essential health services without suffering financial hardship consistent with legally binding human rights norms including the right to health and the principles of equality and non-discrimination so that ‘no one is left behind’.

Cyprus successfully managed to implement reforms leading to universal health coverage despite the enormous constraints during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cyprus implemented the first phase of the new General Healthcare System (GHS) in June 2019, which unified a previously fragmented system that had about 80% population coverage and an imbalance of resources between public and private providers, very high out-of-pocket (OOP) payments, large inequalities in access, long waiting lists and inefficiency of the health system overall.

The new system is financed by state revenues and contributions levied through wages, incomes and pensions. Under the new System, some responsibilities of the Ministry of Health shifted to the Health Insurance Organisation, which serves as the single purchaser of services from both public and private providers. Some of the Ministry’s other responsibilities moved to the new State Healthcare Services Organisation, which is responsible for the development, management, control and supervision of hospitals and health centres, in the public sector. Concerted reform efforts meant that, despite the pandemic, the new health system became operational on June 1st 2020.

**Prioritize healthcare access and financial protection for populations left behind (removing barriers to access, awareness campaigns)**

The Health Insurance Organisation was established by virtue of Cyprus national Law No 89(I) 2001 as a legal entity governed by public law for the implementation of the General Healthcare System (GHS) in the Republic of Cyprus. It is governed by a Board of Directors, with members from a wide sector of society, e.g. government, employers, employees and patients. In accordance with the General Healthcare System Laws of 2001 to 2017, the Organisation is the executive authority for the implementation and management of the GHS.. The Law stipulates the philosophy, system-architecture and main features of the GHS.

The mission of the General Healthcare System (GHS) in Cyprus is to implement and operate a person-centred system based on the principles of social solidarity, justice and universality, with regard to both contribution and coverage of healthcare service’s needs. The GHS is a comprehensive and financially sustainable healthcare System aiming to meet the expectations and needs of Cypriot citizens for equal access to treatment and provision of high-quality healthcare by using, in the best possible way, all available resources. There is a shared vision where a healthcare system ensures that every citizen has equal and unrestricted access to high quality healthcare services. The Health Insurance Organisation is continually strengthening and safeguarding the key principles underpinning its operation such as universality, solidarity in funding, equal access and provision of quality services. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for solidarity and inclusion in healthcare settings and so a decision was made by the Ministerial Council (2133/2019) to guarantee healthcare coverage to all groups of people in Cyprus including legal and illegal migrants.

It is worth noting that persons, who are specified by the Health Insurance Organisation (HIO) Board as ‘special cases’ can also be included in accordance with the Regulations. The HIO may, at its discretion, include on a voluntary basis and under terms and conditions set by internal regulations, persons who are excluded from the GHS.

Prior to introduction of the new General Healthcare System, a powerful awareness campaign was launched online and offline, through mass media, social media and helplines in order to inform both beneficiaries and providers about the System. Training was provided for health professionals in a user-friendly digital environment. Health information leaflets were issued in different languages and available also online. Facilitators were appointed in all districts in order to help individuals who encountered difficulties to register as beneficiaries on the system. All sectors of society were included in the awareness campaign. The GHS Contact Centre provides services and facilitates access to a single point of contact between the Health Insurance Organisation and beneficiaries, healthcare providers, or other individuals requesting information on all issues concerning the General Healthcare System.

1. **Coverage packages** based on human rights principles and right to health

The aim of the General Healthcare System (GHS) is to deliver continuous high quality healthcare services to all citizens .The main features of the system are:

* **Universal coverage of the population**
* **Equal and equitable treatment of all beneficiaries**
* **Provision of a comprehensive package of healthcare services**
* **Freedom of choice of provider by the beneficiaries**
* **Social reciprocity**

In accordance with the WHO definition of “health’ as being a state of complete physical mental and social well-being, the GHS offers a comprehensive package of health services including very affordable medicines**.**

To ensure access to medicines, under the General Healthcare System beneficiaries pay a flat co-payment of only EUR 1 for the generic equivalent of a prescribed medicine. The current list of non-hospital medicines covered includes at least 1 510 products. As part of attempts to contain costs to medicines, Cyprus was an early signatory of the Valletta Declaration in which 10 EU Member States have committed to working together to ensure affordable access to medicines. This collaborative approach aligns with the European Commission’s pharmaceutical strategy for Europe.

A robust primary care service with access to multidisciplinary teams, emergency mental and palliative care, and access to secondary care at outpatients and inpatient stay are also included in the package. Beneficiaries are entitled to preventive dental care, physiotherapy occupational therapy and rehabilitation services within the GHS.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the expansion of coverage under the General Healthcare System, the proportion of the population reporting unmet needs for medical care in Cyprus due to cost, travel distance or waiting times was low. According to a survey in 2019, just 1 % of the population reported unmet medical care needs. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of **a comprehensive primary care service for ongoing access of patients during the period lockdown**. Telephone and online access to health professionals and mental health practitioners addressed the needs of the patients at home. At the beginning of the COVID pandemic, a coordinated service was set up by the Medical and Public Health Services with the Social Services to facilitate the protection, communication, vaccination and care of occupants of care homes while maintaining their dignity and comfort.

The GHS is following the updated National Cancer Strategy, patients are entitled to choose their provider and a concerted effort is underway to integrate services, share information, improve data collection and to facilitate ongoing research.

Vaccination is also provided free of charge by personal doctors and by maternal and child services. Vaccine coverage rates are closely monitored and in general are high in Cyprus. At the beginning of each school year, health visitors belonging to the School Medical Services assess vaccination records of students, for those who are not up to date recommendations are made for vaccination and a follow up check is carried out to ensure the catch-up vaccination has been completed. An early roll- out of the National Vaccination Plan for COVID-19 with mobile units to reach isolated communities resulted in a very high overall vaccination coverage rate. Cyprus has also stepped up its influenza vaccination coverage for older persons.

By law, the Medical and Public Health Services of the Ministry of Health are responsible for prevention and control of infectious diseases. The Ministry of Health played a central role in steering the country’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic**.** In January 2020, the Medical and Public Health Services set up a multidisciplinary Task Force involving public health experts, scientists, politicians, academics and civil society in order to respond swiftly and effectively to the pandemic crisis.. Coordination was at the highest level of the Council of Ministers and there was close collaboration with the healthcare services and patient groups.

1. **Proactively increase resources** available for health services (to what **extent are people covered).**

The GHS is a comprehensive and financially sustainable healthcare system aiming to meet the expectations of Cypriot citizens for equal access to treatment and provision of high- quality healthcare by using, in the best possible way, all available resources. Services are allocated according to need and in keeping with international guidelines. The use of resources is based on the principle of the best health for most.

For the implementation of the GHS, a special fund was established for purposes of gathering the relevant [contributions](https://www.gesy.org.cy/en-us/hiofinancing) and from which all payments to providers of healthcare services will be made. The GHS fund is managed by the Health Insurance Organisation (HIO). The main source of financing is contributions levied on wages, incomes, pensions and state revenues. In order to safeguard the long-term financial sustainability, its budget is regulated with a hard-cap global budget. The IT system can readily facilitate swift and real time audit control.

1. **Removal of non-financial barriers (reproductive health services, migrant health services)**

The General Health System has been designed to cover the needs of the entire population. Sexual health services are provided by various health professionals including community nurses, midwives, gynaecologists and dermatologists. Non-governmental organisations such as the family planning association are also involved in sexual health services.

Free condoms are distributed to migrant reception centres, youth centres and LGBT communities. School health services offer interacting health education at all levels of education and as part of pre and postnatal counselling. There is a specialized care centre for management of HIV positive patients from their initial diagnosis to treatment and monitoring run by highly trained multidisciplinary teams. **Antiretroviral treatment is available free of charge**.

The Unit for Surveillance Prevention and Control of Communicable Diseases, part of the Medical and Public Health Services, is responsible for carrying out monitoring of trends in disease prevalence. On entry to the Republic of Cyprus migrants are screened for sexually transmitted disease and are treated accordingly.

1. Examples **of inclusive transparent and accountable process** ( involvement in decision making ongoing monitoring)

Despite the initial teething, problems in implementation, a bundle of measures were put in place to avoid misuse of the General Healthcare System. Perhaps the most important blueprint is that the GHS is fully IT-operated. This allows more transparency better control and enhances communication between providers and the Health Insurance Organization. The General Healthcare System is being constantly reviewed and modified according to the changing needs of its beneficiaries. Performance incentives based on quality care indicators are being revised on a regular basis. The General Healthcare System in Cyprus aspires to eradicate inequity, protect beneficiaries from catastrophic health expenditure and to offer a full spectrum of health services while safeguarding quality through medical audit and extended use of clinical guidelines.

1. Address **needs of specific populations** (e.g. migrants, refugees)

* Upon arrival in Cyprus, migrants are granted **free access to the General Health System** thus ensuring equal rights to access with other citizens
* The Migrant Reception Centre has a multidisciplinary healthcare team available consisting of physicians, nurses and health visitors with 24-hour cover for any acute medical issues. The healthcare team works in close collaboration with the Unit for Surveillance Disease Prevention and Control.
* Comprehensive health screening is carried out on new arrivals for TB, HIV, Syphilis, Hepatitis B and C according to WHO guidelines. Newcomers are screened for TB using Mantoux testing, positive cases are referred for Chest X-rays and further investigations. Contact tracing and treatment of positive cases are in line with WHO guidelines and a great effort is made to increase treatment adherence and follow up so as to reduce the risk of multi-resistant TB.
* Vaccine coverage is assessed and free vaccination is provided for the migrant families at the health centre by the health visitors in line with the national immunisation scheme.
* Gynaecological and paediatric services are provided in nearby hospitals.
* Migrants with mental health issues are seen and supported by mental health professionals
* In accordance with the Istanbul Convention, asylum seekers who declare that they are victims of torture are seen and assessed by specially trained health professionals. They are also offered support and treatment by mental health professionals.
* Plans are in motion to strengthen health monitoring, to enhance data collection and to implement agreed protocols on control and prevention of communicable disease.
* We are committed to providing high quality holistic person-centred healthcare to our migrant population and thus reducing health inequalities. Regular training and ongoing professional development for our health professionals caring for the migrant families is also a priority for the Ministry of Health.

The island of Cyprus with a population of less than 1 million in the East Mediterranean enjoys good overall health, with one of the highest life expectancies in the EU. We have an innate sense of dignity and justice and we are aware that a healthcare system is as strong as its weakest link. One of the important lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic was the need to protect vulnerable members of our communities through inclusion, global solidarity and social cohesion.

In the words of Margaret Chan, the former Director-General of WHO, ‘universal coverage is the single most powerful concept that public health has to offer’.