

My health, my right

Seema Jain

Department of Community Medicine, Lala Lajpat Rai Memorial Medical College, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Dr Seema Jain, Professor & Head, Department of Community Medicine, Lala Lajpat Rai Memorial Medical College, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, President-IAPSM UP/UK 2024-2025, FIPSM, FIPSM UP/UK, Ex-member In-charge of Health and Hygiene All India Women Conference

Email: drseemajain11@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Even in the twenty-first century, often dubbed the digital age or era of technology, health remains a fundamental aspect of human life. The World Health Organization (WHO) asserts that "enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition."⁽¹⁾ Despite this, in 2021, over half of the global population, approximately 4.5 billion individuals, were not enjoying full coverage of essential health services.⁽²⁾ As we celebrated the World Health Day on April 7, 2024 with the theme "My health, my right", it is crucial to examine the significance of health as an inherent human entitlement, exploring its multifaceted dimensions and the implications of ensuring its fulfilment for individuals and communities.

Health, the basic human right

Health is defined as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity and the ability to lead socially and economically productive lives.⁽³⁾ According to the constitution of WHO, "the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition."⁽¹⁾ Health is considered as a basic human right under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁽⁴⁾ The concept of "right to health" has been outlined in various international agreements such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and

Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. ⁽⁵⁾

Health as a right encapsulates the belief that individuals have an inherent right to access quality healthcare, make informed decisions about their well-being and live a life free from preventable diseases and illnesses. It entitles everyone the right to a system of health protection providing equality of opportunity for everyone to enjoy the highest attainable level of health, the right to prevention, treatment and control of diseases, access to essential medicines, maternal, child and reproductive health services, equal and timely access to basic health services, provision of health-related education and participation in health-related decision making. This right assures freedom from non-consensual medical treatment and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Non-discrimination is a key principle in human rights and is crucial to the enjoyment of the right to the highest attainable standard of health. All health services, goods and facilities must be made available, accessible, acceptable and of good quality.⁽⁴⁾

Health as a right takes into account underlying determinants of health like safe drinking water, adequate sanitation, safe food, adequate nutrition and housing, healthy working and environmental conditions, health-related education and information and gender equality.⁽⁴⁾ Additionally, it involves ensuring security during times of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or any other circumstances beyond human control. Hence right to health is interwoven with the right to security and a good standard of living.

Furthermore, health is crucial in enabling individuals to engage in other endeavours that contribute to their overall well-being.(6) As the constitution has provided us with the privilege to access various other 'human rights', it is high time to understand what place does health rights holds in our lives. An individual in good health is more capable of participating in social, economic, and cultural endeavours, as well as engaging in civil and political duties, thus enhancing their overall well-being, social security, and standard of living. This indicates that the right to health stands as a cornerstone for enhancing overall well-being and fostering human development.(7)

Current health status of the world: Are all individuals enjoying the right to health?

The WHO Council on the Economics of Health for All has determined that at least 140 nations acknowledge health as a human right within their constitutional frameworks.(2) We all are aware that WHO in collaboration with various countries and organisations has left no stone unturned in ensuring access to the best healthcare services everywhere possible; still numerous challenges impede the realization of health as a fundamental right. The main threat to the right to health is health disparities which are defined as differences that occur by gender, race or ethnicity, education or income, disability, living in rural localities, or sexual orientation.(8) Factors such as gender discrimination, cultural norms, and political instability further exacerbate these challenges, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. Another challenge is inadequate healthcare infrastructure including healthcare facilities, medical supplies, trained healthcare personnel, thereby restricting access to essential healthcare services. The high cost of healthcare services, medications, and health insurance premiums often pose significant financial barriers, especially for marginalized and vulnerable populations, leading to delays in seeking care or foregoing treatment altogether. Another challenge is not having adequate health education and making the poor and marginalized populations aware of the facilities available and their health rights. Stigmatization of certain health conditions, such as mental illness, HIV/AIDS, and substance abuse disorders, can deter individuals from seeking timely and appropriate care, perpetuating negative health outcomes and exacerbating social exclusion.

Milestones to achieve the right to health:

Improving health equity: Persistent racial, ethnic, and socio-economic gaps in health outcomes stem from systemic injustices in accessing healthcare,

education, employment, and housing. To tackle these discrepancies, specific multi-sectoral interventions targeting underlying issues and advocating for health equity are necessary. Appointing someone from their own community and training them to provide health literacy and spread awareness will be an effective step. Incorporating initiatives to combat stigma and discrimination linked to specific health conditions into comprehensive public health strategies fosters empathy, comprehension, and inclusiveness. Governments, civil society groups, healthcare providers, and individuals each have crucial roles in advocating for policies and initiatives that advance health equity and uphold the universal right to healthcare for everyone.(9)

Enhancing health literacy: At the heart of the "My Health, My Right" concept lies the importance of health literacy, which involves acquiring, comprehending, and applying health information to make informed choices about personal health. Health literacy enables people to take an active role in their healthcare, embrace preventive measures, and assert their rights in the healthcare system. Studies show that limited health literacy correlates with worse health results, higher healthcare expenses, and lower compliance with medical advice. Thus, initiatives to enhance health literacy are crucial for equipping individuals with the understanding and abilities needed to navigate the intricacies of healthcare effectively.(10)

Striving for universal health coverage: Universal Health Coverage (UHC) is defined as ensuring that all people and communities can access the preventive, promotive, curative, rehabilitative, and palliative health services, of sufficient quality to be effective, while also ensuring that the use of these facilities does not expose the individual to financial hardships. Under the Sustainable Development Goals, UHC is the key to achieve all targets under Goal 3- Ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all at all ages. Governments should prioritize the implementation of universal health coverage (UHC) initiatives aimed at ensuring that all individuals have access to essential healthcare services without facing financial hardship.(11) Many developed countries have realized the importance of health of the nation and hence spend as much as 6% to 8% of their GDP on the health care of the country.(12) In India, the public expenditure on health was 2.2% of GDP in 2022.(13) India needs to significantly increase its investment in healthcare infrastructure and resources, including medical facilities, equipment, and healthcare professionals. This can be achieved when the public too realises

and demands to protect their right to health as they do and prioritise other human rights. This will definitely attract the government too; and give the health budget its due.

Disease-specific measures: Allocating resources to health education and promotion initiatives can enable individuals to make informed choices regarding their well-being, embrace healthy habits, and avert the development of chronic ailments and diseases. Concerning communicable diseases, robust surveillance systems for early detection and warning and health education regarding prevention and therapy are crucial. As non-communicable diseases rise, prioritizing health promotion, education on healthy lifestyles, and regular screening becomes essential. Additionally, mental health awareness warrants equal emphasis. Special priorities can be given to those at risk and protection can be done via all levels of prevention.

CONCLUSION

Health is an essential human entitlement, integral to the dignity and value of each person. Realizing the right to health promoting health literacy, fostering community engagement, and strengthening health systems based on principles of equity, accountability, and transparency. It is essential for each individual to understand that “you're the steward of your body and mind, so it's crucial to make choices that support your overall health and happiness”. Whilst efforts are being made at community, state and national levels; it is an individual's responsibility to accept and understand health as their own integral right so that the last individual at the last mile gets access to every healthcare service that is being provided by the health organisations.

“Your health is a precious asset, value it more and protect it well!”

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

The authors haven't used any generative AI/AI assisted technologies in the writing process.

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