

## PROVIDING HEALTH FOR ALL

Relevant for: Health, Education & Human Resources | Topic: Health & Sanitation and related issues

Today, on Universal Health Coverage (UHC) Day, I wonder how many readers are aware of what UHC is. According to the World Health Organisation, UHC means “ensuring that everyone, everywhere can access essential quality health services without facing financial hardship”. It sounds basic, yet the basics often pose a major challenge. Japan has been leading the international efforts towards UHC, including its inclusion in the sustainable development goals and G20 agenda under our chairmanship next year, because health is one of our fundamental rights.

India has taken the vital first step towards UHC through Ayushman Bharat. This challenge is reminiscent of the path that Japan took more than half a century ago. Japan created national health insurance coverage in 1961, when it was yet to take off economically. A major political decision was required to expand national health insurance and establish medical schools all over Japan. The implementation of UHC could only have been possible through an early and vast national investment, and through a comprehensive government effort, with the Ministries of Health, Finance and Education, as well as local governments, working together.

This investment has paid off. UHC has increased the number of healthy people and healthy workers in Japan. It has contributed to the economic miracle of Japan. Moreover, UHC has ensured social equity by functioning as a mechanism for redistribution of incomes. Even in the remotest of places in Japan, you do not have to worry about healthcare. The peace of mind which UHC ensures to the Japanese is an indispensable ingredient of our overall well-being.

We are also partnering with India in wide-ranging projects for better healthcare. Japan has previously worked with India to eradicate polio in India. Today, Japanese and Indian doctors are exchanging ideas and expertise at a research and control centre on diarrhoea established by Japan in Kolkata, and precious lives of newborns are being saved daily in a children’s hospital constructed in Chennai. In 17 cities across Tamil Nadu, urban healthcare systems are being strengthened with our cooperation.

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Japan at the end of October, India and Japan signed a new Memorandum of Cooperation on healthcare to pursue the synergies between Ayushman Bharat and Japan’s Asia Health and Wellbeing Initiative. We aim to pursue our cooperation in various fields, such as honing skills of doctors in surgery of trauma as well as providing technical training for Indian nurses studying in Japanese caregiving facilities. We hope these efforts will lead to a better health ecosystem and the promotion of UHC in India. Japan is also willing to learn from India. For instance, Ayurveda can bring a new dimension to Japan’s healthcare system. The path towards UHC is not short. But India has taken the first bold step, and Japan will march along with India on this path, sharing its lessons, as a friend.

*The writer is the Japanese Ambassador to India*

The government’s maternity benefit programme must be implemented better and comply with the Food Security Act

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