

## EDITORIAL

### Primary health care for universal health coverage: time to accelerate

Zsuzsanna Jakab  
WHO Regional Director for Europe



Primary health care is at a crossroads. It has been established as the foundation of health systems across the WHO European Region (1), as the countries of the Region have made it their ambition, without exception, to advance the principles laid out in the Alma-Ata Declaration (2). This in turn has yielded improved population health and health equity, as well as economic advantages such as slower growth in health care spending (3). It has also proved to be the best platform for responding to changing health needs and demographics, environmental challenges and emergencies (4, 5).

Yet, on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Declaration, we are confronted with persistent challenges and new trends that need to be curbed, including: quality deficiencies that contribute to performance gaps, such as preventable hospitalizations for conditions sensitive to primary care; increasing numbers of people from vulnerable groups who are in need of tailored interventions; and persistent issues of prestige in primary care, which weaken the workforce. Tackling these so-called “elephants in the room” is necessary to secure the public’s trust, attract new talent, and counter entrenched attitudes and structures that have continued to stand in the way of primary health care.

With the 2030 deadline for achieving the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on the horizon, there is new impetus to reach universal health coverage via strengthened primary health care. Never before have we been more likely to succeed in this endeavour. This anniversary year has brought with it a surge in political momentum in the European Region: from

the high-level meeting on noncommunicable diseases in Sitges, Spain, to the themes of the Tallinn Charter’s 10th anniversary – include, invest, innovate – primary health care has been put at the heart of responsive and sustainable health systems (6).

In the days before the Global Conference on Primary Health Care, held in Astana, Kazakhstan, the WHO Regional Office for Europe hosted the WHO European Healthy Cities Network in Almaty, Kazakhstan, where the Almaty Acclamation of Mayors (7) was adopted. This commitment reiterates the essential role of cities, urban places and local governments in achieving health for all. The scientific community from the Commonwealth of Independent States also gathered in Almaty at a conference dedicated to facilitating linkages between policy, research, education and innovative practice (8). Other European events, including a consultation on the responsible use of medicines and a workshop on the integrated delivery of health and social care, have served to take stock of strategies and share country experiences for primary health care strengthening in the Region.

The year culminated with the adoption of the Astana Declaration at the Global Conference on Primary Health Care. Adoption of the Declaration means that primary health care was not only born but has now also been immortalized in our Region. The global leadership of Kazakhstan is to be greatly credited for this achievement, along with its unwavering commitment to primary health care.

Now our work begins. The need to accelerate primary health care is the key message and theme of this special issue of *Public*

*Health Panorama*. The editorials propose 10 policy accelerators drawn from the articles in the issue itself, and make the case that research and practice have minimized uncertainty and provide a clear agenda for getting to work. The accelerators are the tried and tested opportunities for making change happen. They are rooted in the pillars of the European Framework for Action on Integrated Health Services Delivery (9), and apply systems thinking to put each into practice.

Implementing the Astana Declaration will require leadership at all levels. The editorials bring on board varied perspectives to start a conversation on implementation with actors at different levels of engagement, and illustrate the cross-sectoral action required to see through bold policy choices.

The Regional Office is fully committed to supporting countries in progressing towards the SDGs. For this progress to occur, implementation mechanisms are needed. A multi-agency coalition on primary health care in the Region is one such mechanism being established; it will act as a pan-European enabler to facilitate and promote the implementation of SDG 3, to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, including target 3.8 on universal health coverage. In our Region, the WHO European Centre for Primary Health Care, based in Almaty, acts as a resource centre and as a hub for technical expertise and policy advice to take forward this and other efforts that aim to achieve people-centred, integrated health services delivery.

With this special issue of *Public Health Panorama*, we wrap up the year-long celebrations of primary health care. From the team working together on the cover, to the varied country cases illustrating policy in practice, research articles testing new tools and approaches, and discussion pieces, this special issue is about sharing experiences, showcasing innovation and inspiring action.

## REFERENCES<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All references accessed on 4 December 2018.