

UNIVERSAL HEALTH CARE - A TOP PRIORITY

A programme of Universal Health Care in Saint Lucia has pre-occupied the thinking of the government and has been eagerly anticipated by all St Lucians.

Consequently in October 2003, Cabinet approved the amended report of the Task Force established to review the possibility of implementing a National Health Insurance in Saint Lucia. Since then, a Steering Committee and several Sub-Committees have been activated to operationalise the programme.

A total of eight sub-committees were established to address issues such as registration, human resource training and development and a basket of services and overseas care that considers standards and quality assurance, health information and management, legislation and public education.

The communication and marketing strategy adopted to date has been one of direct engagement with the community of interest groups. Between November 2004 and February 2005, a two (2) person team of Ms Emma Hippolyte and Dr Stephen King conducted discussions with communities around the island. To date the team has met with ten (10) communities, namely, Vieux Fort, Soufriere, Dennery, Babonneau, Choiseul, Laborie, Anse La Raye, Canaries, Gros Islet and Castries. The team has also met with members of the business community in Castries and Vieux Fort.

Though attendance at several of the community meetings was less than satisfactory, persons from Anse La Raye, Canaries, Laborie and Choiseul turned out in large numbers. The session for workers in Castries was also well attended. Notwithstanding the low numbers who turned up for some of the discussions, participation was always lively and enthusiastic.

It is clear that there is broad public support for the UHC programme based on the issues raised by the persons engaged. Perhaps the most significant concerns expressed by participants related to the mode of financing, the assurance for quality service and the implementation date for the UHC.

Most persons supported a flat tax as the funding mechanism. It was conceded that the funding mechanism chosen would impact the start-up date of the UHC, as there would be need for a sufficient reserve to be built.

The communities also used the opportunities provided to vent their concerns about other issues associated with the health care delivery system of the island. For instance persons expressed their dissatisfaction with the present service at their health centres. Specifically, they highlighted the absence of doctors on a regular basis, the

discontinuance of the public assistance card to access the health system as well as the absence of service after 4:00 pm.

The public also expressed concern about the quality of care and the equity of care in the delivery system. They wanted assurance that the UHC system would improve the quality of care.

A consulting firm, *Odyssey Consultinc*, from Trinidad and Tobago, was engaged to prepare a Human Resource Strategic Plan and a Training Plan for the UHC and the entire health system of Saint Lucia. The firm has submitted its report.

In response to issues of quality assurance, the *Canadian Council on Health Services Accreditation* (CCHSA) was contracted to conduct a risk assessment on all the health providers (i.e. Victoria Hospital, Tapion Hospital, St. Judes Hospital, Golden Hope and Turning Point) which are expected to operate within the UHC system.

The consulting teams has submitted their reports, and during the months of March and April, held review meetings with the providers. The CCHSA made a number of recommendations, which if implemented will help Saint Lucia achieve international accreditation for its health facilities within the next three to six years. The reports shall be used as blue prints for quality improvement programmes within the health sector.

The Health Information Management System will serve as the central nervous system in the effective operation of a UHC. Sanigest International, a Costa Rican based firm, was engaged in February 2005 to conduct this consultancy. The firm expects that by late 2005, the platform/framework for the operation of the information system could be established, and the UHC could commence registration of participants.

A Legislative Drafter was contracted to review the legislative implications of establishing a UHC and to draft appropriate legislation and regulations which will govern the operations of the UHC. The Consultant has submitted a draft Bill which has been forwarded to the Attorney General for review and comment.

The committee established to review pharmacy and therapeutic services has submitted a proposed drug formulary. However, there needs to be further discussion with the health care providers as well as a detailed costing exercise before the proposal could be accepted as the national formulary.

The committee responsible for determining the basket of services which the UHC should provide has submitted its report. This report has been forwarded to the St. Lucia Medical and Dental Association and the St. Lucia Nursing Association for their review and endorsement.

The steering committee was of the firm belief that a socio-economic impact assessment of the introduction of the UHC needed to be undertaken.

The European Union is now providing technical assistance to the Ministry of Health to assist in the preparation of a strategic plan for the health sector. The Terms of Reference for the technical assistance have been modified to permit the conduct of a socio-economic impact assessment of the introduction of the UHC. The impact assessment is being undertaken by *HERA* (Health Research for Action), and they have indicated June 30th 2005 as their date for submission of their report.

Recognising the need for greater synchronicity between the introduction of UHC and the other reforms taking place within the health sector, the steering committee has been liaising with the Ministry of Health to ensure better coordination of efforts, and pave the way for a smoother transition to a UHC system. One area where this collaboration is most evident is in the discussions on the governance structure of the hospitals.

Whilst the public eagerly awaits the realization of universal health care, the UHC Steering Committee is taking every precaution to ensure that when the programme gets underway, there will be little, if any impediments to the operations of the health care programme.