

COMMENTARY

UHC – “BETTER HEALTH FOR ALL” BECOMING A REALITY

By Emma Hippolyte, Chairperson – UHC Taskforce

Universal Health Care (UHC) is now approaching its implementation phase and becoming a reality in St. Lucia. It is universal in the sense that it will provide all St. Lucians – irrespective of their economic status and social standing, equal access to a basket of quality healthcare and services.

UHC is being rolled out at a time when many St. Lucians are expressing a desire for better health services. Access to quality healthcare is the right of all persons. It is the people of St. Lucia who will be the final arbiters of the type of healthcare we as a people receive from our public (and private) health providers.

Generally, there is the tendency to compare the national health services in more advanced countries like the USA, Canada and the UK and the expectation is that UHC in St. Lucia should be similar. It cannot be. The truth is that in each of these countries, while the premise is the same (quality health for all) each country has to put in place a health service that addresses its unique circumstances, health profile and national resources. UHC will be comparable to these countries in the area of access to care, quality of care and accountability.

Under the UHC plan, the operations of Victoria Hospital will be managed by a board of Directors, instead of the Ministry of Health, as is currently the case. This will allow for more hands-on decision making, organisational restructuring and greater efficiency in responding to public needs instead of having to be filtered through the sometimes long and cumbersome bureaucratic mechanism.

Healthcare in any part of the world is an expensive undertaking and St Lucia is no exception. Therefore, in order to fund the UHC every St. Lucian will contribute to the cost of this service when they purchase consumer goods (except food and clothing). It is the proposal that approximately \$30 million of the \$60 million needed will be raised by government through the imposition of a health and environment levy.

The UHC concept has been widely discussed and debated. We have arrived at this point after engaging the services of reputable local, regional and international experts and

through several working committees, each looking at different aspects of the program. The result is that UHC has allowed us to determine where we presently are, in terms of the delivery and quality standards of healthcare, where we want to get to and what it will take to get us there. In a nutshell, UHC is a good thing for health in St. Lucia.

Of course, all our healthcare problems will not disappear overnight. But, after the start-up issues are sorted out, UHC will give St. Lucians a health service they can proudly embrace. There will definitely be a tremendous improvement in the delivery of service and expanded access to care. UHC will concentrate on secondary and tertiary care while Primary Health Care (the health centres, community hospitals and public health) will remain under the responsibility of central government. It means that the Ministry of Health will focus on Primary Health Care reform simultaneously to the development of the UHC. Town and village hospitals, health centres and clinics – which are grossly under-utilised, will be rationalised, renovated and upgraded. These will be the first point of reference for persons seeking medical attention. This will remove the burden on both our large hospitals to deal with every condition, many of which could be dealt with in the first place by primary health providers.

The idea is to make all health facilities customer service driven institutions and ensure that we achieve “Better Health For All”.