It’s time to recognise self care as an integral component of health systems

Empowering and supporting people to manage their own health benefits everyone

The deeply personal nature of sexual and reproductive health, which is often affected by social, cultural, and legal barriers to accessing support or services, means that self care can empower and enable people to manage their health in ways that are often beyond the reach of the health system. Self care also has an important role in advancing sexual and reproductive rights. This may range from increasing women’s agency over contraception and unintended pregnancies to enabling testing for sexually transmitted infections in populations that do not come into contact with healthcare, or providing self care information when healthcare is limited in humanitarian emergencies.

WHO’s general programme of work (GPW13) is focused on achieving triple billion goals by 2023—a billion more people benefiting from universal health coverage, a billion more people having better protection from health emergencies, and a billion more people enjoying better health and wellbeing. Whether it’s relating to the adoption of new technologies or as a guiding principle, few healthcare approaches sit as comfortably across these three goals as self care.

We believe that self care has a crucial part in achieving these aims, but much work remains to be done. A crucial step will be to reorient health systems so that responsibility for supporting self care is integral to the role of health systems and healthcare is co-produced with individuals and communities. This can be achieved by raising the profile of self care through creating a stronger evidence base and by working with communities to increase demand for safe, effective, and acceptable self care strategies. Unhelpful or harmful self care practices should be identified and people using them supported with safer alternatives. It is on this foundation that guidance can be built and the profile of self care raised in health policy debate and in national health plans.

It is time to recognise the importance of self care as an integral component of the health system that can support people and help achieve the triple billion goals. With this new BMJ series we hope to stimulate debate, contribute to evidence informed policies, and raise the profile of this important area.

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Self Care Interventions for Sexual and Reproductive Health

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