

**Editorial**

**HEALTH SERVICE COVERAGE AND ITS EVALUATION**

Elena Lungu

Institute of Public Health, Iași, România

Health service coverage is considered as a concept expressing the extent of interaction between the service and the people for whom it is intended. For the measurement of coverage, several key stages are first identified, each of them involving the realization of an important condition for providing the service: a coverage measure is then defined for each stage, namely the ratio between the number of people for whom the condition is met and the target population. Thus, a set of these measures represents the interaction between the service and the target population. In many countries high priority has been given to the development of basic health services or primary health care.

Health service coverage depends on the ability of a health service to interact with the people who should benefit from it, for example: the ability to transform the intention to serve people into a successful intervention for their health. This transformation process involves a variety of factors, such as availability of resources and manpower, distribution of facilities, supply logistics, people attitudes towards healthcare, etc. It is quite impossible to evaluate the process in its many

details, but it is possible to observe the number of people for whom the service has satisfied certain criteria related to the intended health intervention and to compare that number with the target population.

Coverage is normally expressed by the proportion of the target population who can receive or have received the service. The number of people for whom the service can be provided express the service capacity and indicates the potential of the service. Also, the number of people who have received the service express the service output and indicates the actual performance of the service (potential coverage, actual coverage).

The relationship between service capacity and output is also an important aspect of health service, expressed as service utilization. It is normally expressed as the ratio between output and capacity. The distinction between coverage and utilization is necessary to be done: utilization refers only to the service and its measurement; coverage express the relation between the service and target population.

The most important aspect of the measurement of coverage is the description in measurable terms of the

service. The description must at least answer to the following questions:

- a) What is the aim of providing the service?
- b) What does the service do?
- c) For whom or what is the service intended?
- d) What are the essential resources required for the service?
- e) How much of the essential resources would a unit of service require?
- f) How can the performance of the service be measured?
- g) What are the criteria for satisfactory performance of the service?

From the point of view of service provision, it is possible to identify some important stages to define measurements of appropriate coverage.

1. Manpower, facilities, etc – *availability coverage* – are always required in order to provide a service. The ratio between this capacity and the size of the target population gives the measurement of coverage for this stage.
2. The service must be located in such a way to be reached by people who should benefit from it- *accessibility coverage*.
3. The service must be acceptable to the population, otherwise people may not come for it and may seek for alternatives- *acceptability coverage*.
4. The number of people who have contacted the service is a measurement of the service output; the ratio between this and the size of the target population gives a

measurement of coverage called *contact coverage*.

5. The contact between the service provider and the user does not always guarantee a successful intervention. Therefore a service performance has to meet some satisfactory criteria. The number of people who have received satisfactory service is thus another measurement of service output and the measurement of coverage based on this output is called *effectiveness coverage*.

A scheme for the evaluation of a coverage can comprise or require some elements as following:

- (a) information- demographic, epidemiological and socioeconomic – on the population with which the service is concerned.
- (b) knowledge of the health problem that the service is intended to deal with and of the activities of the service;
- (c) ability to gather information on the operation of the service.

#### REFERENCES

1. Bulletin of the World Health Organization, 1988, 56 (2): 295- 3003.