UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE (UHC) - GS II MAINS

Q. Universal health coverage (UHC) is the best prescription for the healthcare sector of India. In light of this statement, discuss the potential advantages and challenges of implementing Universal Health coverage in India. (15 marks, 250 words)

News: *WHO Youth Council urges parliamentarians to take action on universal health coverage*

What's in the news?

- WHO Youth Council represented by Kristina Almazidou presented a letter to Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General and to Mr Chungong, Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Secretary General, urging them to mobilize parliamentarians and reinvigorate action towards Universal Health Coverage (UHC).

Universal Health Coverage:

- Universal Health Coverage (UHC) refers to a system where all individuals and communities have access to the quality health services they need without facing financial hardship.
- In the context of India, this includes health promotion, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliative care, without experiencing any financial hardship or risk of impoverishment.
- UHC can help to address the current health disparities that exist in India, as it would ensure that everyone, regardless of their social status, has access to essential health services.

Significance of Universal Health Coverage in India:

1. Improved Access to Health Services:

- UHC would ensure that all Indians have access to necessary healthcare services, including preventive care, treatment, and rehabilitation, regardless of their financial status or geographic location.

2. Reduced Financial Burden:

- UHC would protect individuals and families from catastrophic healthcare expenses, reducing the financial burden on households and preventing them from falling into poverty due to healthcare costs.

3. Better Health Outcomes:

- Access to healthcare services will improve health outcomes and reduce mortality rates by diagnosing and treating illnesses and diseases at an earlier stage
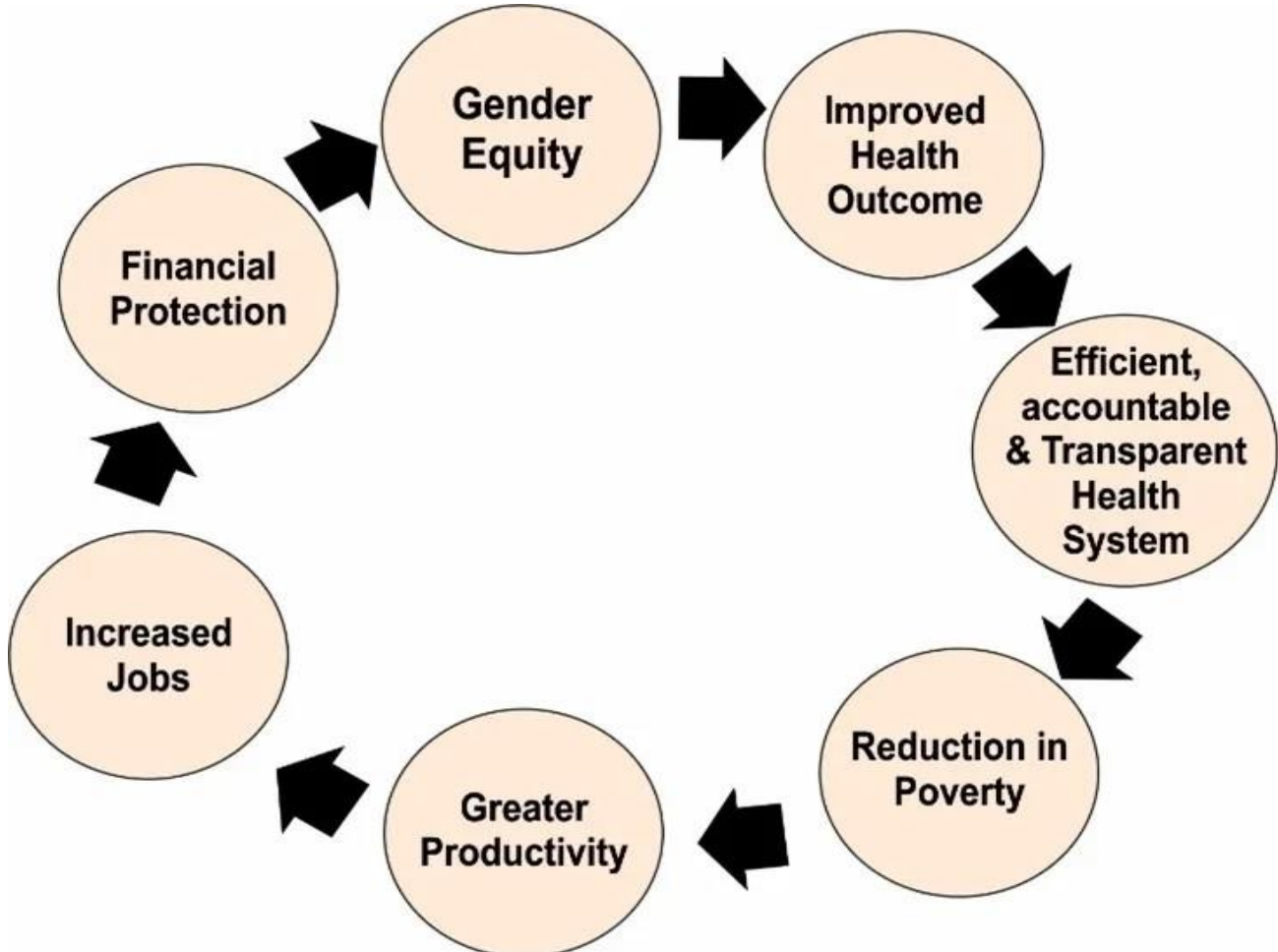
4. Increased Productivity:

- Improved health outcomes would lead to increased productivity and economic growth as a healthy workforce is more productive.

5. Increased Government Accountability:

- UHC would increase government accountability in healthcare, as the government would be responsible for ensuring that all citizens have access to essential health services.

Challenges Related to Universal Health Coverage in India:

1. Lack of Adequate Funding for Healthcare:

- It's just only 1.5% of the GDP resulting in insufficient infrastructure, staff, and medical supplies in many areas.

2. More on Rural Areas with Inadequate Infrastructure:

- Unequal distribution of healthcare resources with urban areas often having better facilities and medical staff than rural areas.
- In rural areas, Primary health care centres (PHC) are short of more than 2900 doctors, with the shortage up by 200% over the last 10 years to 27,120.

3. High Out-of-pocket Expenses for Healthcare:

- According to government reports around 68% of the health spending is from patient pockets, which can be a barrier for people living in poverty or with limited financial resources.

4. Inadequate Health Insurance Coverage:

- India has one of the lowest insurance coverage, government contribution is roughly 32% as compared to 84% in the UK.

5. Limited Access to Specialized Healthcare:

- With many people in remote areas having to travel long distances to access specialized medical care.
- Example - Tribal areas of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand.

6. Poor Quality of Healthcare Services:

- With issues such as understaffing, lack of training, and corruption leading to low-quality care in some areas.
- Example - Doctor density ratio in India is just 8 per 1000 as per WHO report.

7. Limited awareness and education about health and healthcare, with many people in India lacking basic knowledge about health and disease prevention.

Way Forward:

1. Increase Public Financing for Health:

- As envisaged in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, at least 5% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) should be earmarked for public health to achieve UHC by 2030.
- This aligns with the World Health Organization's advocacy for an increase in Primary Health Care (PHC) spending by at least 1% of the GDP.

2. Establishment of a Public Health Commission:

- To operationalize multisectoral public health action in a decentralized manner, a Public Health Commission is recommended.
- This commission would coordinate various initiatives across sectors, ensuring a unified approach to public health.

3. Decentralization and Community Engagement:

- Decentralization of planning, implementation, and monitoring of health services to build a sustainable system rooted in local sociocultural contexts.
- Every village or urban ward should have an Arogya Kendra (health center) financed by the state but managed by local volunteers under community guidance.

4. Inter-sectoral Coordination with a "Health in All" Approach:

- Adopting an inter-sectoral coordination approach ensures that health considerations are integrated into all public policies.
- This approach can address social determinants of health and promote a healthier population.

5. Regulatory Reforms and Engagement with the Private Sector:

- Implement regulatory reforms to improve the quality of care and effectively engage the private sector in UHC goals.
- This includes strategic purchasing and provider payment reforms to ensure efficient resource use.

6. Global Best Practices:

- Learning from global best practices such as England's Health and Social Care Act 2012, which reorganized health services to create a more efficient system, and Thailand's National Health Security Act 2002, which established the right to standard and efficient health service for all citizens.

To achieve Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in India, we need constitutional amendments, increased public funding, decentralization of health services, incentivizing medical personnel to work in rural areas, technology, public-private partnerships, inter-sectoral coordination, strategic purchasing, payment reforms, and healthcare industry regulation.