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## ***26 – Sexual and Reproductive Health in Primary Care. Where Do We Go from Here ?***

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### ***Sexual and Reproductive Health: Worldwide***

Sexual health and reproductive health are relatively new concepts. They were introduced at the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, 1994. Since then efforts around the world have been made and in most countries sexual and reproductive health (SRH) strategies have been developed and policies adopted. While it is true that many countries have much to celebrate when it comes to progress in improving SRH and increasing access to SRH services, it is also true that in other countries implementation has lagged and related outcomes have often been slow. One of the most troublesome trends over the last several years has been widening inequities among and within countries. Great disparities remain and universal access has still not been achieved. This is particularly true for those excluded by poverty, gender, ethnicity, disability, situations of conflict, migration or other form of marginalization.

Sexual and reproductive health problems constitute major health challenges. It has been estimated that aspects of reproductive and sexual ill-health account for nearly 20% of the global ill-health burden for women and some 14% for men, more than a third of the global burden of disease for women of childbearing age and one-fifth of the burden for the whole population.

Investing in sexual and reproductive health is one of the surest and most effective ways to promote equitable and sustainable development. It saves lives, improves health, reduces poverty, furthers primary education, especially for girls, promotes gender equality, strengthens health systems, advances development and protects human rights.

According to 2012 estimates, the use of modern contraceptives in the developing world prevented an estimated 218 million unintended pregnancies, which in turn averted 55 million unplanned births, 138 million abortions (40 million of them unsafe), 25 million miscarriages and 118,000 maternal deaths.

Therefore, universal access to sexual and reproductive health is therefore not only an essential human rights, it is also a key international development priority.

### ***Sexual and Reproductive Health: Concept***

Sexual and reproductive health is fundamental to physical and emotional health and well-being to individuals, couples and families and to the social and economic

development of communities and countries.

The World Health Organization’s (WHO) vision on sexual and reproductive health is the attainment of all peoples of the highest possible level of sexual and reproductive health. It strives for a world where all women’s and men’s rights to enjoy sexual and reproductive health are promoted and protected, and all women and men, including adolescents and those who are underserved and marginalized, have access to sexual and reproductive health information and services. (see Table 1)

Table 1	The concept of sexual and reproductive health (adapted from reference 1 and 2)
<b>The five components</b>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Improving maternal and newborn health (antenatal, perinatal, post-partum and neonatal care)</li> <li>2. Providing high-quality services for family planning, including infertility services</li> <li>3. Eliminating unsafe abortion and providing post-abortion care</li> <li>4. Reducing sexually transmitted infection, including HIV, reproductive tract infections, gynaecological cancer and other sexual and reproductive health morbidities</li> <li>5. Promoting sexual health, including adolescent health</li> </ol>	
<b>The five key areas for action and partnership</b>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A. Intersectoral and agency collaboration</li> <li>B. Mobilizing political will</li> <li>C. The reorientation of the national health-care system towards primary health care</li> <li>D. Creating supportive legislative and regulatory frameworks</li> <li>E. Strengthening monitoring, evaluation and accountability</li> </ol>	

## ***Sexual and Reproductive Health and Primary Care***

In actual practice, sexual and reproductive health is very differently organised across the world and in many cases poorly integrated in primary care. It is often fragmented, not easily accessible, of poor quality and needlessly expensive. It is therefore recommended that sexual and reproductive health care is better integrated in primary care.

There are several reasons for a specific focus on the role of primary care. Two of them should be highlighted:

- By integrating into primary care, sexual and reproductive health quality will be improved through person-centred, instead of disease-centred, approaches that are particularly needed in this sensitive field of health care.
- Several sexual and reproductive health problems do not necessarily require interventions by highly specialised professionals and can be dealt at the primary care level with important savings and without loss of quality of care.

Care of women and men throughout the life cycle, including adolescents, is central. Their needs are fundamental and should drive decision-making, with a focus on health equity and with particular attention to vulnerable groups.

Therefore, increasing the capacity of primary care clinicians to provide high quality sexual and reproductive health care is an urgent public health priority.

Sexual and reproductive health can be a sensitive and sometimes controversial issue, which is very difficult to address in various countries or cultures. Both research and consultations over the last decades have identified sexuality-related communication as an issue that requires urgent attention. While patients would like their health-care providers to discuss sexual health concerns, clinicians lack the necessary training and knowledge to feel comfortable addressing such issues. WHO recommends the training of health-care providers in sexual health knowledge and in the skills of brief sexuality-related communication.

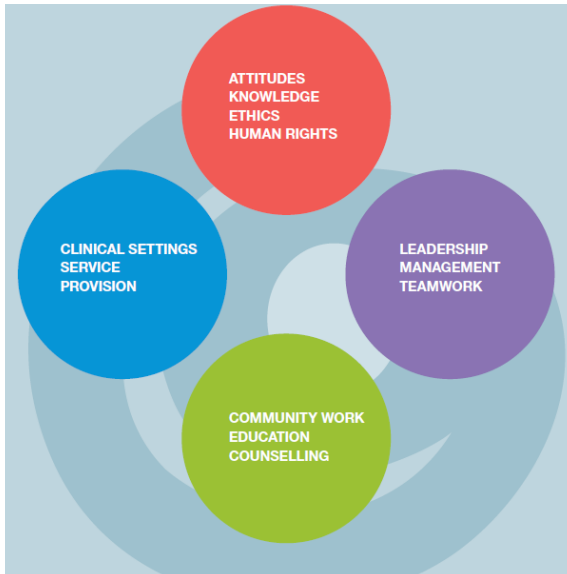
In curricula for primary care workers, sufficient time and attention should be given to training on all aspects of basic sexual and reproductive health care. Postgraduate training should be developed and offered for those who are not yet

skilled in providing basic sexual and reproductive health care, including regular updating of knowledge and skills.

The *core* sexual and reproductive health competencies that are desirable for use in primary health care have been collected in a WHO's document. They reflect the attitudes, tasks, knowledge and skills that health personnel in primary care may need to protect, promote and provide sexual and reproductive health in the community (see Image 1).

Because sexual and reproductive health includes such a wide range of issues it cannot be expected that all elements should be dealt within primary care. However, primary care can and should play a role in this entire field as the first entry point to health care.

**Image 1. WHO core sexual and reproductive health competencies for use in primary care**



With respect to sexual and reproductive health needs of their patients, primary care physicians should:

1. Assess the sexual and reproductive health status and needs of their patients;
2. Provide patients with current information, education and counselling;
3. Acknowledge their patients' feelings, attitudes and norms that may be obstacles to the achievement of individual sexual and reproductive health;
4. Be aware and respectful of their patients' values and lifestyles with respect to sexual and reproductive health;
5. Be aware of how their own values may influence their practices.

## ***Sexual and Reproductive Health: The Future***

Accelerating progress on sexual and reproductive health for all requires urgent and sustained action by the global community. It is essential that policy makers and national authorities:

- Develop strategies to support broad recognition that sexual and reproductive health is an essential component of primary health care services;
- Enhance health professional education and continuing professional development in sexual and reproductive health;
- Create incentives to expand and diversify sexual and reproductive health workforce;
- Optimize patient access to sexual and reproductive health care.

## ***Take Home Messages***

- Sexual and reproductive health is a global health, development and human rights priority.
- It is essential that primary care, as the first point of entry to the healthcare system, takes a greater responsibility for this field of health care.
- As part of the sexual and reproductive health system, primary care physicians require continuous engagement in lifelong education, development and support.
- Impactful change only comes from collective action involving policy makers, programs managers and primary care workers.

## ***Original Abstract***

<http://www.woncaeurope.org/content/4250-sexual-and-reproductive-health-quality-services-contribution-family-medicine>

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