

SOUTH AFRICA: STATUS OF SELF-CARE

The Value of Self-Care

Embedding self-care practices into the health care continuum has the potential to improve health and quality of life while simultaneously supporting health system sustainability. Self-care practices empower individuals by providing them with the information and tools to make decisions about their own health and care. An increased ownership over their own health promotes, at a systems level, the efficient use of limited healthcare resources and relieves the burden on healthcare providers - saving 1.8 billion physician hours to attend to more severe health conditions. A related impact of this is the increased focus on improving disease prevention efforts by empowering individuals to address minor ailments at home.

At the global level, current self-care activities are generating substantial monetary savings as well as healthcare workforce savings, totalling at least \$119 billion per year. The above should be coupled with a positive impact on global productivity when over-the-counter treatment is adopted at first, granting approximately 40.8 billion productive days, corresponding to a value of \$1,879 billion in economic welfare effects. Looking at the future, the cost saving effect is estimated to be approximately \$178.8 billion per annum, with increased productivity gains of 71.9 billion productive days per annum. If we add other positive effects brought by other self-care practices, such as the use of preventive care, oral health care and the use of vitamins and mineral supplements, the overall gain will increase further.

There are more proven self-care products and practices available today than ever before, and it is within our collective power to unleash the benefits of truly self-care enabled health systems around the world, if only we set

up adequate policy frameworks that embed self-care seamlessly into the care continuum.

Self-care belongs to individuals, families, communities, health care professionals, and policymakers at different levels and with different responsibilities. However, it is a primary responsibility of policymakers to design the enabling environment for each of the stakeholders to fulfill these responsibilities.

A deeper international focus on self-care, brought up by a WHO Resolution on Self-Care could help foster the necessary momentum to fully integrate it into health systems for the benefit of individuals and society. This should include a definition of self-care and its enablers, and the self-care interventions countries can undertake according to the WHO Guidelines on self-care interventions for health and well-being.[1]

About \$1 billion per year are currently being saved by healthcare systems in the Sub-Saharan region as a result of people practicing self-care. 141 million hours of individuals' time are being saved and 7 million hours of physicians' time thanks to self-care. In the future, gains from self-care could be doubled (in contrast to current gains). In addition to almost \$4.0 billion in monetary savings from the cost containment, the five billion days saved in productive time may translate into welfare gains of over \$31.5 billion.

Moreover, an estimated 514 million hours will be saved for individuals as a result of not having to see a physician. These time gains can be associated with the elimination of travel and waiting times and may also lead to increased quality of life. The overall impact on quality of life is expected to increase from one million currently to almost three million. [2]

South Africa: Overview

To assess the situation in South Africa, it's useful to take into account the overall African context. The Self-Care Readiness Index, which covers South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya, suggest that resources, including digital ones, that could support self-care are still rare in the Africa region. In a Digital Self-Care report published by the Self-Care Trailblazer Group, self-care is primarily associated with sexual and reproductive health in this region. [3]

The Economic and Social Value of Self-Care Report suggests that observed self-care practices typically include self-medication, self-testing, self-administration, and self-injection, and is often associated with management of malaria and chronic health conditions such as diabetes, and sexual and reproductive health. [4]

The Self-Care Readiness Index found that South Africa has a long history of community health worker (CHW) programs. South Africa's National Development Plan 2030 formally acknowledges the important role of CHW programs in addressing the social determinants of health.[5] While these programs have historically been implemented and overseen by NGOs, CHWs are increasingly integrated into the country's primary healthcare system. Despite these efforts, health literacy remains low in the country and health promotion remains a priority.[6]

[In South Africa's new National Strategic Plan for the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (2022-2027), self-care is mentioned as a key element of the continuum of NCDs care. The need for improved self-management appears to be a priority under health promotion and prevention - "undertake awareness campaigns on healthy food options with the aim to capacitate communities to scale awareness efforts whilst enabling self-management", "undertake awareness campaigns on the benefits of physical activity on health promotion campaigns to capacitate communities to scale awareness efforts whilst enabling self-management" and "enable and strengthen self-management." [7]

In 2021, the South African Health Products Regulatory Authority (SAHPRA) launched an online mobile phone friendly directory of OTC medicines to make it easy for consumers and healthcare providers to access drug information online, which bodes well with health education and people empowerment.[8]

Recommendations

- Embed the concept of self-care into the highest possible policy recommendations, e.g. The National Health Insurance (NHI) Bill 9 and the National Health Act 61 of 2003.
- Build on the work done on sexual health and self-care to increase awareness about all facets of self-care.
- Increase awareness towards responsible self-care by increasing self-care literacy and highlight a prominent role for nurses, front-line healthcare workers and pharmacists.

End Notes

- [1] WHO Guidelines on self-care interventions for health and well-being. World Health Organization, 2022. Available at: <https://app.magicapp.org/#/guideline/Lr21gL>
- [2] Self-Care Socio-Economic Research: The Global Social and Economic Value of Self-Care. Global Self Care Federation, 2022. Available at: https://www.selfcarefederation.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/2022-06/FINAL_GSCF%20Socio-Economic%20Research%20Report%202022062022.pdf
- [3] Self-Care Trailblazer Group. Digital Self-Care: A Framework for Design, Implementation, and Evaluation. Population Services International, 2020. Available at: <https://www.psi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Digital-Self-Care.pdf>
- [4] The Global Social and Economic Value of Self-Care 2022. Global Self-Care Federation. 2022. Available at: <https://www.selfcarefederation.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/2022-08/GSCF%20Socio-Economic%20Research%20Report%2028072022.pdf>
- [5] National Development Plan 2030: Our future - make it work. South African Government. Available at: https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/ndp-2030-our-future-make-it-workr.pdf
- [6] Self-Care Readiness 2021. Global Self-Care Federation. 2021. Available at: <https://selfcarepromise.org/self-care-readiness-index/scri-2021>
- [7] National Strategic Plan for the Prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases (2022-2027). Department of Health of the Republic of South Africa. 2022. Available at: <https://www.sancda.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/NCDs-NSP-SA-2022-2027.pdf>
- [8] OTC Medicine Information. South African Health Products Regulatory Authority. Available at: <https://medsinfo.sahpra.org.za/home>