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Wednesday 23 September 2009

PM's article on universal healthcare

The Prime Minister has written an article about the need to help the world's poorest countries develop universal healthcare.

Read the article

Sierra Leone is the most dangerous place in the world to be a mother. Not because of war, violence or crime – all of which the government has made admirable progress in addressing – but because a woman has a one in six chance of dying in childbirth in her lifetime. It is a similar story in many developing countries: what should be the happiest time in a family's life is actually one of the most deadly.

Take Adama from West Africa. Last Christmas Eve, when she was six months pregnant, she went into premature labour. By the next day she was bleeding heavily and taken to hospital where a nurse told her husband, Pa Abu Kamara, that he would have to pay for medicines. He explained, "I didn't have any more money. I just took Adama out of the hospital and took her home." Delirious and unable to speak for herself, Adama died the following day.

Her tragedy, like so many others, is that she could have been saved with simple medical care. So too, in fact, could the thousands of children around the world who needlessly die before their fifth birthday, all because they are charged for treatment.

A recent survey in Sierra Leone found that nearly 90 per cent of people who did not visit a doctor when they were sick said that "lack of finance" was why they stayed at home. It is a recurring theme across the developing world.

During the 1980s many poor countries were pressured into charging fees by flawed development policies and bad advice. This was not only wrong; it does not work. User fees for health services have raised only small amounts of revenue but they have excluded hundreds of millions of poor people from basic care.

When a charge of just 7 pence was introduced in Kenya for de-worming medicines in children, demand fell by 80%. It was the same story with mosquito nets – a charge of just 45 pence cut the use of these life-savers by three quarters among pregnant women.

According to the British Medical Journal, the reduced use of health services in 20 African countries charging fees was alone responsible for 233,000 child deaths a year. Other estimates suggest that at least three million children have died as a direct result of user fees. A few pence is the price of life or death for millions.

The evidence is shocking and conclusive and the entire world should be shamed into action.

Burundi, Nepal, Malawi, Zambia, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Liberia have taken major steps towards the provision of free services. They should be applauded for their leadership. These governments, and many others like them, know that it is immoral to demand money from poor people when they are sick—to ask how much they have, not what disease they have.

And the international community must support the progress these countries have made and encourage others to follow their lead.

So today at the United Nations I will call on every country in the developed world to help poor countries achieve the goal of universal health coverage. This will not be easy and it will take time. But there is one step we can take immediately: to stop charging poor people for health services that they cannot afford.

An event in New York tonight will see a major step towards that goal, with announcements from a range of countries, some of which will revolutionise their national healthcare provision. The UK is supporting them through our assistance at the country level and will put in place a new facility to advise countries who want to provide free healthcare.

This event is the culmination of the Taskforce on International Innovative Financing for Health Systems of which I was co-chair, set up to look at how we can help fill the financing gap in developing country health systems. In response to this work, the UK will provide £250 million towards a £600 million expansion of the

International Financing Facility for Immunisation to allow improvement of health systems.

I hope today it will be a turning point: a day when the battle to provide healthcare to all and abolish user fees won a significant victory. It may be remembered a historic step, but we should see it in simple human terms: a mother giving life whose life is saved and a baby born who will live for decades not hours.

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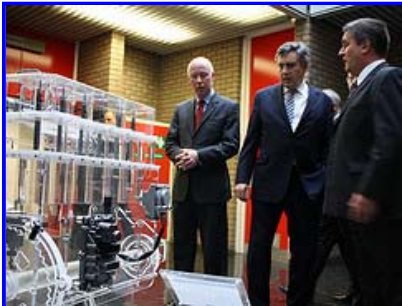
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