



SUSTAINABLE HEALTHCARE FINANCING SOLUTIONS:

Enhancing efficiency in the existing health system through Self-care Policy

Having adequate and sustainable healthcare financing is one of the key enabling factors to ensure a greater chance of success in innovation development as a key engine to drive the country's economy. It is important that the government manages to have appropriate and adequate sources of funding since increasing chronic diseases and life expectancies associated with an aging population tends to drive overall healthcare expenditures up. This will also ensure sustainable access to healthcare, treatment outcomes, and quality of life for patients, which require public and private efforts to provide long-term alternative and collaborative solutions.

This can be achieved through a multi-stakeholder approach, aiming for sustainable long-term solutions rather than short-term measures and that can avoid unintentional impacts which may result in reduced access for patients. The European healthcare industry also experienced similar challenges in the other government agencies including in the European countries, where we also experienced some solutions to bring that for benefit of Thailand's development like alternative access models, innovative and value-based financing models, as well as promoting self-care policy as the contributing solution to promote sustainable healthcare financing. This could support the sustainable system development to enhance patient access to pharmaceuticals and medical devices and government budget management.

According to this, we would like to discuss the proposal related to self-care as we experienced in other countries. This would contribute as a solution for sustainable healthcare financing by enhancing the efficiency in the existing healthcare financing system through enabling and incentivizing self-accountability in health or self-care promotion.

Self-care, within the healthcare framework, is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as “the ability of individuals, families, and communities to promote health, prevent disease, maintain health, and cope with illness and disability with or without the support of a healthcare provider.”¹ It constitutes a cornerstone of the healthcare system.

The role of self-care interventions in supporting health systems, as recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO), is significant in several ways. Currently 3.6 billion people – half of the world – lack access to essential health services. WHO recommends self-care interventions for every country and economic setting, as a critical path to reach universal health coverage, promote health, keep the world safe, and serve the vulnerable. Self-care recognises individuals as active agents in managing their own health care, in areas including health promotion; disease prevention and control; self-medication; providing care to dependent persons, and rehabilitation, including palliative care.

[1] “Self-care for health and well-being,” World Health Organization, https://www.who.int/health-topics/self-care#tab=tab_1

The benefits of Self-care can be highlighted as follows:

- Firstly, **self-care empowers individuals to actively participate in maintaining their health, preventing diseases, and managing certain health conditions.** This proactive engagement helps alleviate the burden on formal healthcare systems, allowing them to focus on more critical cases.
- Additionally, **self-care contributes to community health by promoting preventive practices, reducing the burdens in the hospitals and for healthcare professionals, and fostering a sense of individual responsibility for well-being.** For example, during the COVID-19 situation, self-care plays a crucial role in reducing the burden on hospitals. By practicing self-care, social distancing, wearing masks, washing hands regularly, and staying home when feeling unwell, not only safeguards personal health but also contributes to the collective well-being of the community. It allows healthcare professionals to focus their attention on more severe cases, ensuring that medical resources are utilized efficiently.
- **Self-care has a profound impact on socio-economic factors by contributing to reduced healthcare costs through the prevention and management of chronic conditions.** Self-care provides economic benefits to a country’s health system,² particularly in the current context of shrinking fiscal space. Various evidence regarding quantified economic impacts can be illustrated especially on cost containment, individual and physician time savings, and productivity enhancement. In US, using OTC medicines to treat common cold can save 4.75 billion USD per year. Early treatment may reduce the duration of the symptoms as well as complication risks that will involve an additional cost burden in the health system. It positively influences workplace productivity, lowering absenteeism and improving job performance. Prevention of long-term health issues and the public health impact of self-care practices lead to improved overall community well-being. Integration of digital health tools fosters innovation, while self-care education empowers individuals and creates a more informed society. Understanding these dynamics is essential for shaping policies that enhance equitable access to healthcare resources and contribute to societal well-being.

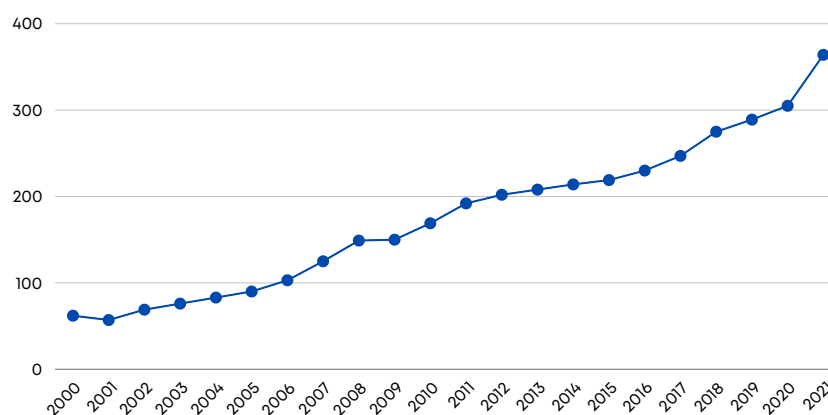


Figure 1 Thailand current health expenditure per capita (2000 – 2021)
Source: World Bank Open data, 2024.

[2] "Benefits of OTC Medicines in the United States," CHPA, <https://www.chpa.org/sites/default/files/media/docs/202010/Benefits%20of%20OTC%20Medicines%20in%20the%20United%20States.pdf>
World Bank Open Data. 2024. United Nations, Current health expenditure per capita (current US\$) - Thailand. Retrieved on 15 April 2024 from World Bank Open Data: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.CHEX.PC.CD?locations=TH>

For Thailand context, self-care plays a crucial role in promoting the health and well-being in aging society. Encouraging self-care practices among older individuals contributes to maintaining health, preventing chronic conditions, and fostering independence. This approach helps reduce the burden on healthcare systems and empowers the elderly to actively manage their health.

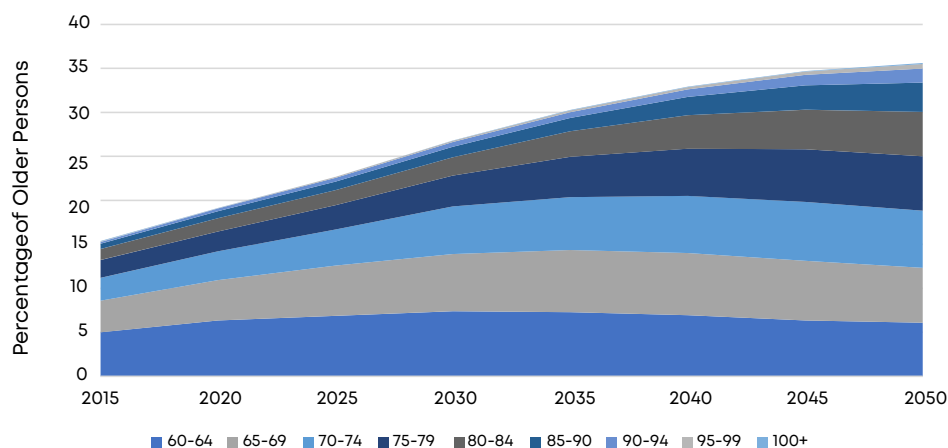


Figure 2 Thai elderly population share by age group between 2015 – 2050
Source: United Nations (2020).

Additionally, self-care can support access to healthcare for the population in rural or remote communities and ensure their good health and well-being. The integration of digital health solutions further enhances accessibility to healthcare resources. The economic implications include potential cost reductions and sustained productivity among the population. Community support and education tailored to the needs are essential for creating an environment that supports resilience.

The development of effective self-care policies is paramount in promoting individual well-being and creating a resilient healthcare system. To achieve this, a comprehensive approach is essential, encompassing education, accessibility, digital health integration, community engagement, and addressing socio-economic disparities. Furthermore, policies should actively promote the use of digital health tools and technologies, fostering innovation and accessibility. Community engagement and support play a vital role, in encouraging the exchange of experiences and knowledge. It is crucial to address socio-economic disparities, ensuring that self-care resources are accessible to all. Establishing a legal and regulatory framework supports safe self-care practices.

United Nations. 2020. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division World Population Prospects. Retrieved on 18 March 2020 from United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs: <https://population.un.org/wpp/DataQuery/>.

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers can create a holistic environment that empowers individuals to actively participate in their health, contributing to healthier communities and more efficient healthcare systems:

1) Modernizing Regulation of Non-Prescription Medicines Through Increased Flexibility

1.1 Facilitating the regulatory assessment for low-risk medicines and supporting the switch/re-classification of prescription medication to over-the-counter (OTC) status

offer several benefits, including increased accessibility and convenience for consumers. This will enhance availability for patients and consumers in self-care accessibility and this transition empowers individuals to take control of their health, providing faster access to treatments for self-diagnosable and manageable conditions.

EABC appreciates the government direction in driving regulatory facilitation and assessment for low-risk medicines that can support patient access to necessary medicines timely and broaden patient's choices.

According to experiences in many countries, many low-risk medicines could be targeted to reclassification. OTC availability can lead to cost savings, faster symptom relief, and greater consumer choice. The process involves regulatory oversight to ensure safety and efficacy, and OTC medications often come with clear instructions for proper use, promoting patient education.

1.2 Facilitating digitalization in healthcare is a crucial element in the healthcare sector, enhancing access, quality, and efficiency. Among the key factors enabling this improvement is Digital Health, contributing to the sustainable and efficient enhancement of individuals' health and wellness in an aging society. Additionally, digitalization creates more opportunities to efficiently deliver services to a broader population with limited resources. Laws and regulations pertaining to digital health play a vital role in facilitating the adoption of technology.

EABC recognizes the growing demand for e-pharmacy to aid in COVID-19 control, allowing patients to access essential medicines without physical visits to pharmacies. Legalized in the European Union, Australia, Switzerland, Singapore, and the Philippines, e-pharmacy requires compliance with specific regulations for online prescription processing, prescription-only medicine dispensing, and home delivery. It addresses concerns of illegal medicine sales and counterfeiting, providing patients access to authorized platforms.

Establishing e-pharmacy in Thailand would necessitate developing relevant laws, ensuring patient safety, and privacy, and supporting quality medicine delivery to patients. EABC encourages regulatory development towards regulated systems to address safety concerns and we offer to share EU experiences to support the development for the benefit of Thailand's healthcare system.

2) Health Literacy Enhancement

Promoting self-care and health literacy³ within the public can alleviate the burden on government healthcare budgets and foster a more sustainable health system. In 2019, Health Systems Research Institute (HSRI) with supported by the Department of Health (DOH) conducted the Thai Health Literacy Survey of Thais aged 19 year and above illustrated that the health domain that had the lowest average health literacy score was the consumer protection followed by healthcare. Moreover, the survey found out that Thais still face limitations in accessing reliable health information, especially when it comes to searching for information about pharmaceutical products and health. Therefore, a recommended strategy involves building knowledge, motivation, and essential skills for accessing, understanding, questioning, and decision-making based on information. It should also aim to simplify various service systems in society, particularly in pharmaceutical and health dimensions. This includes designing systems that enhance accessibility, support convenience, and empower citizens to be as self-reliant as possible; furthermore, integrating digital technology, such as e-labelling for OTC drugs, may enhance public access to information.

3) incentivizing self-care policy

Incentivizing system can support promotion of self-care and self-accountability of the individual. To help promote self-care and ultimately aim to contain medical expenditures, Japan introduced a self-care taxation system in 2017. The impact of income deduction system for OTC drug expenses could create a system that can decrease the national medical expenses and alleviate crowding in hospitals and pharmacies.⁴

These tax incentive helps in individual health promotion and disease prevention. There is a study that self-care taxation system could change in physician prescribing behavior, drug costs decrease by 4.9%. Furthermore, including the effect of a decrease in the frequency of patient visits, the simulation results indicate that drug expenditure is reduced by 5.8% through the self-care tax system.⁵

It is clearer that we need to shift the current healthcare and self-care framework from a model in which citizens are passive recipients of healthcare to one in which people are given better access to the tools that help them adopt proven, effective, and responsible self-care. It is time to address sustainable healthcare by helping people to play a more active role in managing their health by making daily choices on exercise, diet, hygiene, and self-care.

The EABC and its members express readiness to share their knowledge and international experiences to contribute to the development of healthcare systems and regulatory frameworks.

[3] "Ninth Global Conference on Health Promotion, Shanghai 2016," World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/teams/health-promotion/enhanced-wellbeing/ninth-global-conference/health-literacy>

[4] Kawabuchi, K., & Kabeya, Y. (2016). Estimating the Impact of the New Income Deduction System for Over-the-Counter Drug Expenses. Japan-hospitals: the Journal of the Japan Hospital Association, (35), 27-34

[5] NISHIKAWA K. and OHASHI H., The Impact of the Self-medication Taxation System on Drug Cost Control, October 2022 22-J-039, <https://www.rieti.go.jp/en/publications/summary/22100013.html>