The four goals of a health system are:

- health, both the absolute level across the entire population and equity across socioeconomic groups;
- social and financial risk protection in health;
- responsiveness and people-centredness;
- efficiency. \(^\text{13–14}\)

Improving population health is the overarching goal. Health status should be measured over the entire population and across different socioeconomic groups. The safety of populations must be protected from existing health risks and emerging health risks. There should be preparations for resilience to future but still unknown health risks. Health systems should strive for equity in health. Inequitable disparities in health are to be minimized. Sources of inequitable disparity in health may include income, ethnicity, occupation, gender, geographic location and sexual orientation, among others. There are significant variations in health outcomes across the world, within the Region and within countries. Countries and regions with relatively similar socioeconomic status may have quite disparate health outcomes. The way health systems are organized contributes to this disparity. Disparities are most effectively reduced when they are recognized and their minimization is an explicit national goal.

An ideal health system will provide social and financial risk protection in health and be fairly financed. Paying for health care should not impoverish individuals or families. All health systems must be financed, and there must be adequate funding in the system to provide essential services. A WHO definition of a fairly financed health system is one that does not deter individuals from receiving needed care due to payments required at the time of service and one in which each individual pays approximately the same percentage of their income for needed services. \(^\text{15}\) A health financing system that deters people from seeking needed services or impoverishes individuals and families will worsen health outcomes.

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15 Ibid.
Responsiveness and people-centredness represent the concept that the health system provides services in the manner that people want or desire and engages people as active partners. It embodies values of respectfulness, non-discrimination, humaneness and confidentiality. Health systems have an obligation to respond to the legitimate non-health desires and expectations of the population. Responsive health systems maximize people's autonomy and control, allowing them to make choices, placing them at the centre of the health care system.

Improved efficiency is also a desired outcome of a health system. People and populations have a legitimate expectation of receiving the maximum health gain for the money they and their society invest in health. There are large variations in health costs across the world and the Region, even among countries with similar socioeconomic status and similar health outcomes. Part of the variation can be attributed to the efficiency of health systems. Health systems oriented towards primary health care have been shown to provide better health outcomes for the money invested. The chart below presents some of the variations in health expenditure versus life expectancy that occur in the Western Pacific Region. Differences in health systems efficiency and organization may contribute to these variations (see Box 4).

**Box 4. Policy priorities have a large influence beyond per-capita spending**

The organization and management of health systems influence the health outcomes that can be gained with the funds invested. The graph shows that countries in the Region spending relatively similar amounts of money per capita have quite different levels of health, based on life expectancy. The differences cannot be attributed only to the health system, but certainly differences in how health systems are organized contribute to that difference. “Low-income, high well-being” countries have adopted policies that not only reduce inequality but also increase overall health and well-being. Each point on the graph represents a country in the Region.


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