



# **National Health Policy Final Draft**

## **Ministry of Health**

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**Foreword:**

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# PART I: INTRODUCTION

## I.I. Health and Development

From the time of introducing modern health care system in early sixties, the health indices of the Bhutanese population have improved remarkably in almost all aspects. Bhutan has since then sustained primary health care coverage at above 90%. Consequently, Life expectancy rose from 37 years in 1960 to 66 years in 2005 and infant mortality rates dropped from 103 per 1000 live births in 1984 to 40.1 per 1000 in 2005. Further, Bhutan declared Universal Childhood Immunization in 1991 and has sustained immunization coverage of above 90 percent. Similarly, access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation is over 82.5 percent and 90.8 percent respectively. Despite its remote and rugged terrain these achievements in health indicators makes Bhutan a model and a pioneer for promotion of primary health care. Today, Bhutan is also well on its way to attaining most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

These impressive achievements in the health status of Bhutanese population has been brought about primarily by the far-sighted leadership of our monarchs; focus on primary health care approach; integrated well functioning traditional and modern health system; socio-economic growth; increase in literacy rate; and the pursuit of balanced development path guided by the philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH).

The Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) continues to attach high priority to provision of universal access to free health care services, focusing on equity and quality. The priority of extending **“free access to basic public health care services both in modern and traditional medicines”** has been further enshrined as a constitutional obligation and that it shall **“endeavor to provide security in the event of sickness and disability or lack of adequate means of livelihood for reasons beyond one’s control.”** The government also refers patients abroad for life saving treatments beyond the clinical capacity and facilities available in Bhutan.

Health has held a prominent place in Bhutan; government spends 7.4 to 11.4% of total government expenditure on health. As a proportion of GDP, public health spending alone (not counting private health expenditure) comes around 4.1% of GDP, which is far higher than most of the other countries in the South Asia region.

While Bhutan has overcome many obstacles in the past, it now confronts new and varied challenges such as 1) rising health care expenditure; 2) changing disease pattern; 3) inadequate human resources; 4) changing political environment; 5) Increasingly evolving health care needs of the population.

Despite numerous challenges, it is envisioned that National Health Policy shall set agenda and provide general direction to guide the government in achieving the national health goals.

Further social justice and equity in the provisions of health care shall be maintained through sustained focus on primary health care approach.

## **I.II. Vision and Mission**

### **Vision:**

Build a healthy and happy nation through a dynamic professional health system, attainment of highest standard of health by the people within the broader framework of overall national development in the spirit of social, justice, and equity.

### **Mission**

Achievement of national health goals through sustained provision of quality general and public health services.

## **I.III. Aspirations of National Health Policy**

Bhutan recognizes health as a fundamental right and a prerequisite for economic and spiritual development, poverty reduction and the road to Gross National Happiness. The National Health Policy aspires to be congruent with the four pillars of Gross National Happiness and reflects various inputs ranging from social, spiritual, cultural and environmental aspects.

It recognizes the values of democracy, transparency and equity especially addressing the needs of the poor and underprivileged through partnership in health. It also aspires to pursue decentralization policy in health care system.

It aims to promote self-reliance and sustainability by increasing efficiency, productivity, accountability and ownership in health care interventions and service delivery.

This policy is gender-neutral, respects the rights of the people, seeks informed consent and maintains confidentiality in relation to medical decision making and information sharing.

Bhutan aspires to improve the health outcomes by translating the policy statements into strategic framework through collective national efforts.

**The national health policy is living document and may be updated every 10 years if deemed necessary to accommodate the evolving needs and the change in socio-economic scenario of Bhutan.(forward)**

## **PART II: HEALTH SYSTEM**

Bhutan shall provide quality integrated modern and traditional health care services to all Bhutanese citizens at all levels of health care system. The health care delivery shall continue to be structured into a three -tiered health system with the hierarchy ascending from basic health units to district hospitals to the regional and National referral hospitals.

### **II.I Service delivery**

1. The Primary Health Care approach shall be the main guiding principle of Health service delivery and development.
2. The health care coverage shall be sustained with 90% of the population living within 3 hour walking distance from health facility (Out Reach Clinic, Basic Health Unit and district hospital).
3. Bhutan shall provide 100% nationwide access to a health care professional through health facilities and technology-enabled solution.
4. The primary health Centre shall reach out to the people through Out Reach Clinic, Village Health Workers and other available modes of communication.
5. The District hospitals, as the secondary level health centre shall serve as the nodal referral centers for the Basic Health Units within their jurisdiction and to the adjoining Basic Health Units of other districts.
6. The Regional Referral hospitals, as the tertiary level health centre shall serve as the nodal referral centers for the Basic Health Units within their jurisdiction and to the adjoining Basic Health Units of other districts
7. Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Referral Hospital, as the apex hospital, shall provide technical backup to regional referral hospitals, District hospitals and tertiary level care to the general population.
8. Optimal utilization of health services available at all levels shall be ensured; each level of care shall act as a gate keeper to ensure effective and well organized referral and feedback mechanism between primary, secondary and tertiary care.
9. Patient requiring life saving /specialized care not available within the country shall continue to be referred to designated referral centers abroad only if approved by the referral committee.
10. The National referral mechanisms shall not be applicable to patients who have complicated or life threatening conditions that needs appropriate specialist for timely interventions.

11. Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Referral Hospital, as the apex hospital, shall provide technical backup to regional and District hospitals and tertiary care to the general population.
12. Standardized quality health care services based on the tenets of quality shall be provided.
13. All health infrastructures shall be of sustainable design and user friendly by integrating environmental and earth quake resistance features, health principles including disability, women and child friendliness. The District authorities shall be responsible for management and resource mobilization for maintenance of all health infrastructures in their respective Districts.

## **II.II Health Human Resource**

1. The Government of Bhutan shall continue to accord priority in human resource development. Ministry of Health shall device appropriate strategies to meet the shortages of health workers.
2. Bhutan shall follow the Primary Health Care approach and shall prioritize training of more health workers at the primary level and fewer at the specialized level.
3. Health Human Resource projection and deployment shall be based on epidemiological, and population profile and evolving needs.
4. A performance-based incentive mechanism shall be put in place to retain qualified and essential (trained in specialized services) health professional in the system.
5. Only those medical practitioners certified and recognized by the Bhutan Medical and Health Council (BMHC), shall be allowed to practice their profession in the country.

## **II.III Health Information and research**

1. Centralised National Health Information system shall be instituted that provides comprehensive quality health information.
2. Information about a patient shall not be disclosed to a third party without patient's informed consent unless required clinically and by law of Bhutan.
3. Health research shall be encouraged to assist evidence based decisions making and health Policy interventions.
4. Any health related research shall comply with the highest ethical code of conduct endorsed by the Research Ethical Board.

#### **II.IV Medicinal products, vaccines and technologies**

1. The Government of Bhutan shall ensure that 90% of essential drugs are available at all times in all the health centers.
2. The Government of Bhutan shall continue the central procurement and distribution system of medical supplies.
3. Introduction of any new health technologies shall allowed only after assessment and evaluation for their safety, efficacy, quality, indication and cost-effectiveness.
4. Safety, effectiveness and quality of essential medicines and vaccines shall be ensured through an efficient supply management system and promotion of rational drug use.
5. Donation of health technologies in any form shall not be permissible if it does not comply with the specifications and standards of Ministry of Health and regulations of Drug Regulatory Authority.
6. Bio-medical engineering services shall be responsible for maintaining all the medical equipments by using standard protocol for maintenance and condemnation.
7. Facility-based ownership for care and maintenance of medical equipment shall be mandated and institutionalized.

#### **II.V Health Financing**

6. The state shall “provide free access to basic public health services in both modern and traditional medicines” as the constitutional obligation.
7. Bhutan Health Trust Fund shall continue to be an alternative source of health financing to provide sustainable universal access to essential drugs and vaccines.
8. The Government of Bhutan shall institute mechanisms to charge on the demand for unprescribed advanced diagnostic medical services and Non-Bhutanese seeking health care in Bhutan.
9. The Government shall continue with the strategy to charge user fees for non-essential health care services e.g. private cabins, secondary and tertiary dental services.
10. The Government of Bhutan shall secure adequate budget for health sector (At least 10% of the five year plan budgets) to continue providing universal quality health care to the Bhutanese citizens and ensure financial protection against impoverishment due to cost of catastrophic illness.

11. The Government of Bhutan shall continue to explore alternative strategic options for sustainable health financing.
12. **The Government of Bhutan shall explore feasibility of FDI in health services and accordingly design regulatory framework.**
13. **The Ministry of Health shall ensure spending is in line with priorities and explore ways to invest more on low cost and high impact interventions.**
14. **Mechanisms shall be instituted to control unnecessary utilization of advanced medical technologies for diagnostic purposes.**
15. No commitments shall be made during trade negotiations with regard to health and health services (FDI in health-related services and foreign health professionals) in order to retain maximum flexibility for the government to adopt policy measures that guarantee the quality and equitable access to health services.

## **II.VI Leadership and Governance**

### **1. Policy setting**

- a. The Ministry of health shall be responsible for the formulation of policies, programme designs, technical guidelines and directives to all the preventive, promotive, curative and rehabilitative health programmes.
- b. The Ministry of Health shall formulate its strategic plans based on the overall decentralization policy of the government.

### **2. Health legislation and Regulation**

- a. All health interventions shall be carried out in compliance with the existing health related acts and regulations of Bhutan along with international and regional conventions, resolutions and treaties.
- b. The Bhutan Medical and Health Council shall regulate the practice of medical and health professionals in Bhutan.
- c. The Drug Regulatory Authority (DRA) shall function as an independent and transparent authority to regulate and ensure the safety, efficacy and quality of medicinal products.

# **PART III: DISEASE CONTROL AND MEDICAL CARE**

## **III.I Preventive, Promotive and Control Services**

### **1. Communicable Diseases**

- a. Priority shall be given to emphasize cost-effective preventive and control measures for diseases of known epidemic potential and other communicable diseases.
- b. The Government of Bhutan shall establish a National Focal Point to carry out requirements under International Health Regulations(2005) including facilitating development of core national public capacities in collaboration with national and international partners for prevention and control of international spread of diseases; chemical and radio-nuclear events.
- c. The public health laboratory and the centre for tropical and zoonotic diseases shall provide technical backup and scientific evidences in the prevention and control of rare diseases, known epidemic-prone diseases, and emerging infectious diseases of national and international public health significances.
- d. HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria prevalence shall be reduced at least to a level at which it no longer constitutes a public health problem through Multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary approach.

### **2. Non-communicable diseases and health promotion.**

- a. Health promotion, disease prevention and health care services shall be strengthened and incorporated as a vital component in all relevant programmes
- b. Appropriate measures shall be instituted to intensify health promotion interventions that address risk factors causing life style related diseases.
- c. Prevention, support and care services for patients suffering from alcoholism and mental disorders shall be promoted in collaboration with other relevant stakeholders.
- d. National awareness on safety requirements shall be intensified to prevent and reduce the high incidence of mortality and morbidity associated with injuries.
- e. The Government of Bhutan shall strive to contribute towards the national goal of food self sufficiency through effective enforcement of standards and regulations and shall endeavor to assure that foods are of good quality and safe for consumption.
- f. The Government of Bhutan shall strive to reduce malnutrition of all types including reduction of micronutrient deficiency diseases through multisectoral approach.
- g. Safe and appropriate method of hazardous waste disposal shall be adopted to minimize the potential health risks.

- h. Initiatives to raise awareness on potential adverse effects of environmental pollution and contamination shall be emphasized.
- i. Provision of holistic health education in all educational institutions shall be promoted through multispectral approach.
- j. Ministry of Health shall establish awareness raising modalities to prevent occupational diseases and injuries at all workplaces.

### **3. Maternal and Child Health**

- a. Comprehensive maternal and child health care services shall be provided not limiting to family planning and promotion of institutional delivery.
- b. Free and equitable access to safe, quality and cost effective vaccines for all children and pregnant women to protect against vaccines-preventable diseases shall be provided.
- c. The introduction of new vaccines shall be done only after assessing the disease burden, public health impact, cost effectiveness of the vaccine, affordability and sustainability.
- d. Healthy child growth and development shall be promoted through advocating breast feeding, appropriate nutrition, and Integrated Management of Neonatal and childhood diseases.

## **III.II Medical Care**

### **1. Traditional medicines**

- a. The Government shall continue to preserve and promote the traditional medicine system by effectively integrating it into the overall national health care delivery system.
- b. Focused efforts shall be directed towards making Bhutanese “So-wa-rigpa” the centre of excellence in providing quality traditional medical services that is recognizable at an international level.

### **2. Diagnostic and curative services**

- a. The ministry of health shall ensure that different levels of health care facilities provide adequate and appropriate diagnostic and curative services.
- b. All blood and its component shall be made available in adequate quantities to all those who would clinically require transfusion.
- c. Ministry of Health shall ensure that all blood and blood products for transfusion are tested for HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and syphilis.

### **3. Emergency Health Services**

- a. All health facilities shall provide an appropriate system of care in case of emergencies, disasters and epidemics.
- b. National emergency preparedness plans shall be maintained and appropriate resources provided at all levels to respond rapidly and effectively to all health related emergencies of national and international concerns.

### **4. Services for special Needs group**

- a. The Government of Bhutan shall promote facilities which are easily accessible to people with disabilities.
- b. Healthy ageing of older people shall be promoted through social commitment and community involvement.

## **PART IV: PARTNERSHIP IN HEALTH**

Partnership in health shall be encouraged to address local health care needs and emerging public health problems through promoting community ownership, multi-sectoral and international collaboration and coordination.

### **IV.I: Community participation**

1. Active community participation in the health care delivery system shall be encouraged to facilitate in achieving the universal health coverage especially to unreached rural population.
2. Measures shall be developed to ensure the local populations are better informed about life style, environmental and other health problems in order to improve the health outcomes through community participation.

### **IV.II Multisectoral collaboration**

1. All the sectors shall invest for health in their respective agencies and formulate policies and actions accordingly for overall health development. The sectors shall be accountable for the effects of their policies and actions on health.
2. The Government of Bhutan shall ensure to facilitate delivery of quality and efficacious traditional medical plants and products in a sustainable manner.
3. Healthy Public policies shall be formulated to address the public health problems through multi-sectoral collaboration.

4. Inter and intra sectoral collaboration and coordination shall be emphasized to address National health issues.
5. Rural water supply and sanitation schemes shall be intensified and decentralized to Districts and Geogs with active community and multi-sectoral participation to enhance universal access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities.
6. Linkage shall be strengthened between Ministry of Health and other stakeholders outside health with regard to urban water supply and sanitation.
7. Mitigation measures to address adverse effects of climate change on health shall be put in place through emergency preparedness and public education on behavioral adaptations.

#### **IV.III. Public-private partnerships**

1. Strategic mechanisms for participation of the private sector in financing and provision of health services shall be explored with necessary regulations in place and strict enforcement.

#### **IV.IV: International partnerships**

1. The Government Bhutan shall take active part in health development with continued engagement with international organizations.

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