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Universal progress?

And so it came to pass that a new term entered the lexicon of international health, and it became uttered by everyone and anyone who could knit it into their speeches and utterances.

These things do go in cycles but I'm detecting that this one might be just a little bit different. Don't get me wrong. I approve of it, I think it is great, but I just get a feeling that 'we' aren't entirely in control of it.

I'm talking of Universal Health Coverage. It's become the landmark objective. But isn't it just health insurance in another guise. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines it as 'The goal of universal health coverage is to ensure that all people obtain the health services they need without suffering financial hardship when paying for them'. So, typically in Europe or Canada, you've suffered with renal niggles for many years, got treated via your expensively paid for insurance policy, but then when you move into end-stage renal failure, an exclusion clause kicks in from the insurance company and so the state sees you through your final days at its expense.

But what happens when those acute services just aren't available? Tough, it seems, whether you've been paying your insurance all along and now find you are not covered, and tough if you are too poor to have been brought into the insurance net so haven't been treated for those renal niggles in recent years and now you need end-stage treatment... well just forget it.

UHC can work where there is a strong

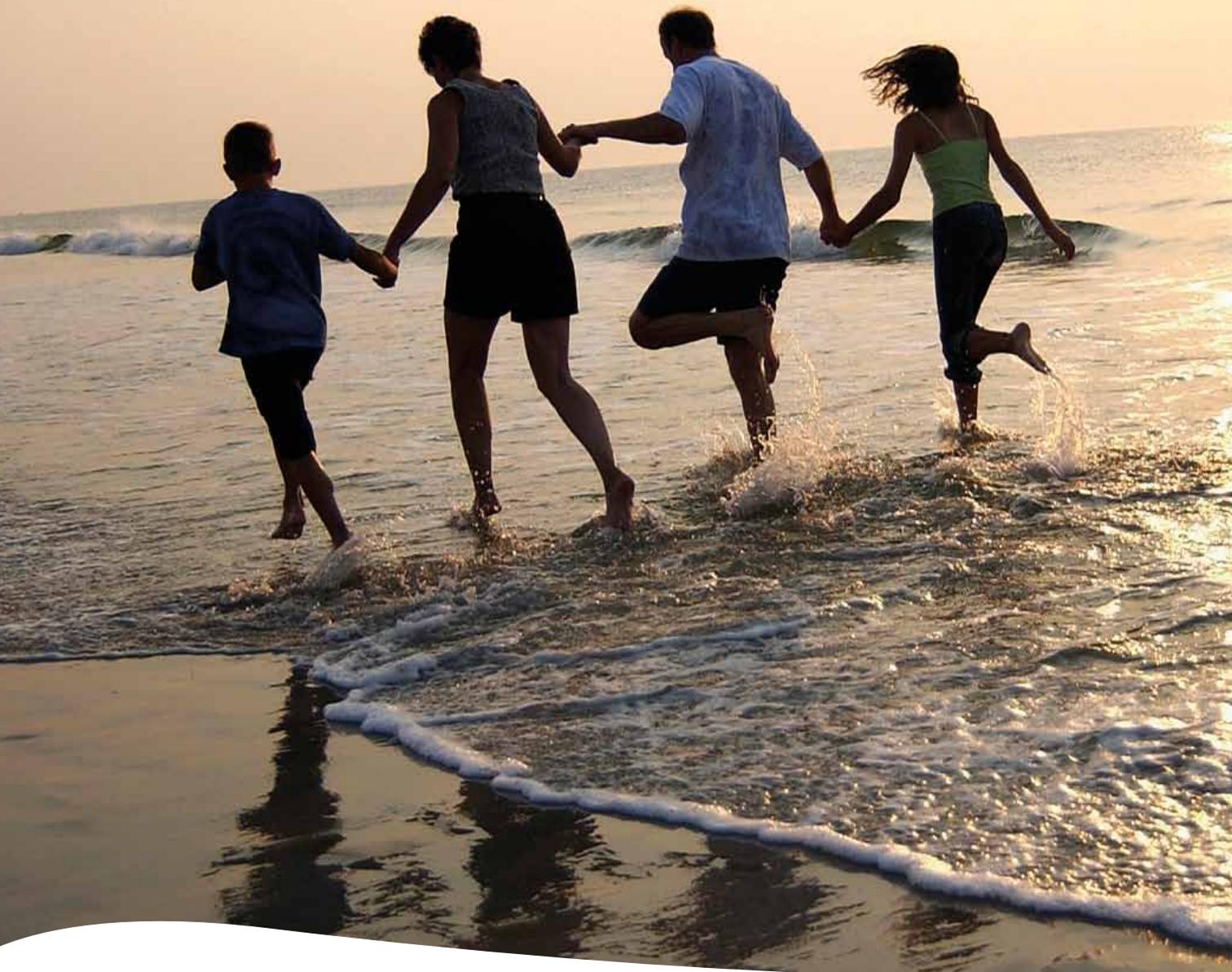
health system and a healthy percentage of the population in formal employment. But suddenly it is the magic ointment for Africa. The insurance industry is happy, many ministers I think are happy as it might take some pressure off their beleaguered finances. But for the huge numbers who can't afford to join up, the safety net is made of rice paper. Healthcare finance is of critical importance, but is this really progress?

Moving on, it was interesting to see a rationalization of the roundabout of meetings that policy makers from Africa embark upon. The meeting in Luanda in April formally joining up the Annual WHO Afro Region Committee meeting with the annual African Union Health Ministers meeting. Our leaders are to be congratulated. Saves time, saves money, and hopefully makes for better policy making. But our honourable friends were clearly in particularly charitable mood as according to the official communiqué they committed to being 'held accountable for the decisions made'. Wow! Could this be a new beginning? Maybe we could start by arranging for a 'renewing of vows' over the Abuja declaration on 15% of national budgets being committed to healthcare. Sadly I think I'm dreaming...



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