

The world faces new challenges in light of health and demographic trends: populations are ageing, and the number of people living with non-communicable diseases and the consequences of injuries is increasing. The health, social and economic consequences of these trends should serve as a call to policy-makers to invest not only in health services that reduce mortality and morbidity, but also in those that improve functioning and consequently well-being. These latter outcomes are at the core of rehabilitation, yet rehabilitation services are often underdeveloped, under resourced and undervalued.

Factors contributing to the unmet need for rehabilitation services include poor accessibility, transport barriers, high out-of-pocket expenses and long waiting times. An additional factor is a lack of awareness of the need for rehabilitation; what it is, what it does, and whom it may benefit. Rehabilitation comprises a set of interventions designed to reduce disability and to optimize functioning in individuals with health conditions to enable them to better interact with their environment.

The role that rehabilitation plays in maximising the impact of other health services – such as surgical interventions, trauma care and management of noncommunicable diseases – and its potential for significant cost savings are also frequently misunderstood and underestimated.¹² For example, rehabilitation has been found to be beneficial in reducing length-of-stay in hospitals and decreasing re-admissions, thus mitigating the negative social and health risks associated with prolonged hospitalizations.

Rehabilitation is part of universal health coverage and should be incorporated into the package of essential services, along with prevention, promotion, treatment and palliation. To this end, on 7 February 2017, WHO, Member States, international and professional organizations, nongovernmental organizations and rehabilitation experts issued Rehabilitation 2030: a call for action, a commitment to key actions to strengthen rehabilitation services in Member States.⁴ These actions include: improving rehabilitation governance and investment; expanding a high-quality rehabilitation workforce; and enhancing rehabilitation data collection.