

A new *Lancet* Commission on Essential Medicines



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Access to essential medicines globally is a highly charged political issue that is often about trade, policies, and protest. Essential medicines are crucial if countries are to achieve universal health coverage, and access will be a major goal for the post-2015 development era.

Today, the discussions need to include newer essential medicines, such as second-line and third-line antiretrovirals (ARVs), together with medicines for cancer, hepatitis C, and non-communicable diseases. In the future, decision makers—irrespective of their country's income—will face many common challenges related to essential medicines, including continuing antiretroviral therapy (ART) for 20 million people living with HIV; new fixed-dose combinations of ART; overcoming stigma to modern contraception and even to vaccination; improving and harmonising medicine regulations to ensure quality and safety; adapted formulations for neonates and children; and securing access to new drug discoveries.

Ensuring equitable and affordable access to medicines is not easy. Radical civil society action was required to force the pharmaceutical sector to provide life-saving ARVs

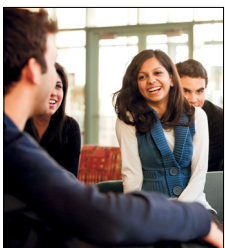
to people living with HIV/AIDS. No other movement in global health has achieved such success. How do we create the same reality in other areas of global health?

The 2012 Access to Medicine Index (ATM), which ranks the performance of pharmaceutical companies, found several areas where all companies could improve substantially. These areas include being more transparent about their practices, expanding tiered pricing schemes, adapting packaging to local needs, making drug donations more needs-based, and facilitating the acceleration of the approval of generic medicines in developing countries. It will be interesting to see how companies have improved in these areas in the forthcoming 2014 ATM index, to be launched on Nov 17.

It is time to take stock of essential medicine's policies and to reaffirm access to essential medicines as part of the progressive fulfilment of the right to health. This Commission has the opportunity to raise global awareness of the relevance of essential medicine's policies to achieve broader global health and sustainable development goals, especially universal health coverage. ■ *The Lancet*

For the *Access to Medicine Index* see <http://www.accessmedicineindex.org/>
For more on *The Lancet Commission on Essential Medicines* see <http://www.bu.edu/lcemp>

Young adults' health warrants greater attention and action



Richard Schultz/Corbis

Young adulthood (18–26 years) is usually regarded as a time of peak physical health and wellbeing. However, this perception is far from the truth for many young adults today. In fact, the dominant health pattern among young adults in the USA is surprisingly unhealthy, as highlighted in a new report released by the US Institute of Medicine and National Research Council last week.

Specific findings with respect to the declining health of this age group include high rates of sexually transmitted infections, and unhealthy behavioural patterns such as poor diet, smoking, binge drinking, and substance misuse. The onset of many serious mental health disorders often occurs in this period. Furthermore, today's young adults are the first generation to experience dramatically rising obesity rates in childhood and adolescence, and they are more vulnerable than previous generations to obesity-related health consequences such as diabetes in later life.

Disturbing health concerns for young adults are not just limited to the USA. Life for young adults is already vastly different today to how it was even a generation ago in a

rapidly changing global world. They are waiting longer to finish degree programmes, marry, and have children, and they find it more difficult to get well compensated entry-level jobs and live independently of their families. As a result, the transition from adolescence to adulthood can be more challenging and complex than in the past, which could put today's young adults at a higher health risk than previous generations. Nevertheless, the unique needs of young adults, and the enormous challenges they have to confront, are always inadequately addressed in a fragmented manner in policy and research worldwide.

Young adulthood is a crucial and distinct period of development, which has profound implications throughout the entire life course. The changing patterns of health of young adults warrants further understanding of the uniqueness of this population, as well as urgent and collective responses engaging all relevant stakeholders—education and employment systems, civic organisations, public health and health-care systems, and, most importantly of all, young adults themselves. ■ *The Lancet*

For the *Investing in the Health and Well-Being of Young Adults* report see <http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2014/Investing-in-the-Health-and-Well-Being-of-Young-Adults.aspx>