



ACCESS TO MEDICINES
AND HEALTH PRODUCTS

Keeping the 100-year-old promise: making insulin access universal

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World Health
Organization

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Foreword

In 1921, researchers at the University of Toronto discovered insulin, which changed the diabetes narrative forever.

In keeping with a promise that insulin “belongs to the world”, the patent was sold for just one Canadian dollar. Subsequently, the private sector was engaged to improve manufacturing processes, technical know-how of insulin purification was shared, prices were reduced to improve affordability, and non-profit-making bodies were established to care for people living with type 1 diabetes.

Those were times of optimism and expectation, with a sense of urgency to give new hope and precious years of life to millions of people living with diabetes. However, despite the goodwill of the early days and collective efforts from many sectors, the promise that insulin would belong to the world has not been kept. Today, at least 30 million people who need insulin for diabetes do not have access to it.

This report presents a global picture with considerable access gaps, especially in low- and middle-income countries, where the use of insulin has not kept pace with the rising burden of diabetes. Even in some high-income countries, the price of insulin is unaffordable for many people, forcing them to ration the medicine, thereby risking their lives.

The report spotlights the main barriers to access to insulin and to medical devices for administering insulin and monitoring glucose levels, which are necessary for the appropriate use of the medicine. Many of these barriers can be overcome immediately through better policies and targeted interventions, with contributions from all stakeholders. The report describes five areas for action that will improve the availability and affordability of insulins and associated devices, as well as the capacity and research and development necessary to address future needs.

On the hundredth anniversary of insulin’s discovery, we have a responsibility to take stock of current inequities and urgently seek to redress them, with the same spirit of solidarity the discoverers of insulin displayed. I hope the pages that follow will inspire new thinking, bolder policies and better collaboration across all relevant spheres, so that the millions of people who today are losing their health and precious years of life to diabetes can finally access a medicine discovered 100 years ago.

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List of abbreviations

COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
EML	WHO Model List of Essential Medicines
FDA	United States Food and Drug Administration
IU	international unit
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NRA	national regulatory authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
R&D	research and development
WHO	World Health Organization

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