

Navigating health autonomy through self-care

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Interest in self-care has exploded in recent years, highlighting its crucial role in shaping future healthcare systems. Imperial SCARU's Dr Austen El-Osta discusses emerging trends, research priorities and self-care policy landscapes, advocating for a global movement towards accessible and empowered health management

The last decade has witnessed a paradigm shift in healthcare, with self-care emerging as a key component in managing health and wellbeing. The collective insights from the World Health Organization (WHO), Imperial College London Self-Care Academic Research Unit (SCARU) and the recent São Paulo Declaration highlight a global movement towards integrating self-care into the fabric of healthcare systems.

This editorial aims to encapsulate the essence of self-care as not just a practice but a necessity for sustainable health futures and as a means to promote health and wellbeing for people from all walks of life and across different settings.

Resurgent interest in the oldest type of care

Self-care presents a proactive approach to healthcare, emphasising prevention, early intervention and managing chronic conditions. It offers a pathway to alleviate the pressures on healthcare systems by reducing hospital visits and healthcare costs, enhancing the quality of life for individuals and contributing to the overall health of populations. Above all, self-care is about personal and community empowerment, bodily autonomy and choice.

Interest in self-care exploded in recent years following the emergence of the lifestyle medicine speciality in Europe and the U.S., the establishment of Imperial SCARU and the publication of the WHO Guideline on Self-Care Interventions for Health & Wellbeing.

Research and development priorities

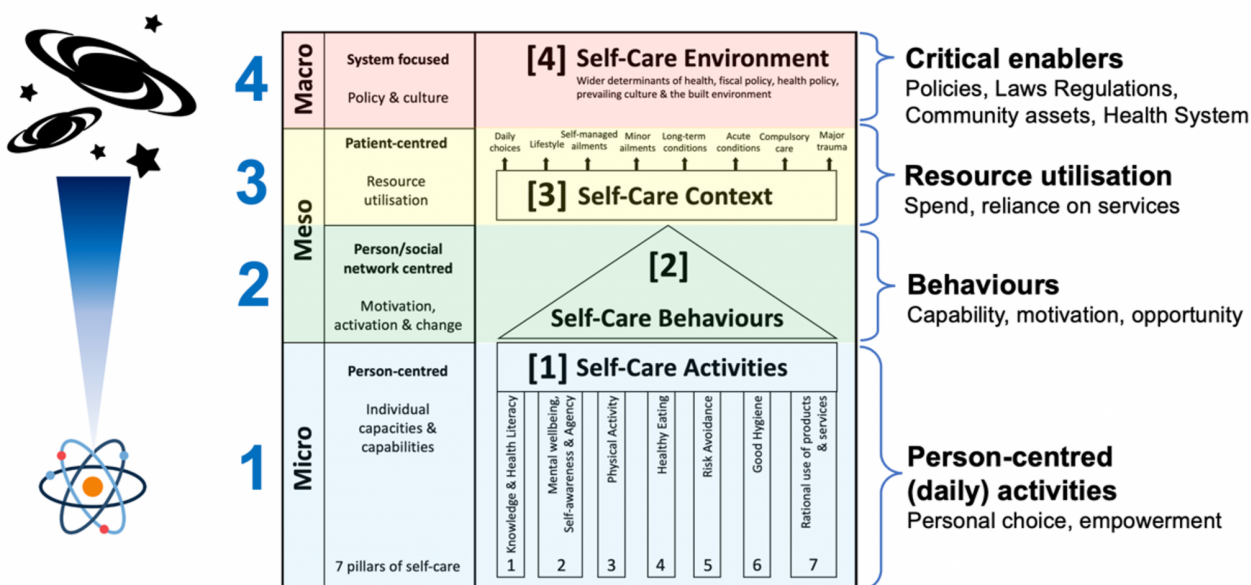
Imperial SCARU was established in 2019 to “make the absolute case for self-care”. Specific areas of interest include finding ways to tackle the challenges of non-communicable diseases or so-called “diseases of the lifestyle” and promoting self-care praxis by leveraging technological advancements like AI, decision support tools, wearable devices and personalised health interventions. SCARU’s initial contribution was the publication of the Self-Care Matrix, which is a unifying framework that could help with conceptualising the totality of self-care.

Another area of key interest is the development of tools to measure self-care capabilities, and finding new ways to address the challenges in advancing self-care practices among diverse populations. The London Self-Care Summit highlighted the urgency of identifying key R&D priorities for self-care.

Above all, there is a clear need for developing a comprehensive and validated tool for measuring individual self-care capabilities, as evidenced by the scoping review on self-care measurement tools. Innovation in self-care technologies, alongside robust research into their effectiveness, is also paramount in establishing infrastructure and policy levers to help promote the adoption of self-care practices that are scientifically sound and culturally sensitive.

In this regard, the evolution of self-care is intricately tied to technological advancements and a growing recognition of its role in addressing the rising epidemic of non-communicable diseases. From wearable devices to AI-driven health apps, technology is revolutionizing how individuals engage with health practices using self-driven healthcare approaches. The emphasis is on empowering individuals with the tools and knowledge to take charge of their health, ensuring self-care is accessible, equitable, and reinforced by new approaches, including the microlearning modality, to developing self-care knowledge.

The Self-Care Matrix



Self-care Policy Landscape and the São Paulo Declaration

The São Paulo Declaration on Self-Care for Universal Health Coverage represents a pivotal moment in self-care advocacy, calling for global policies that support self-care practices, innovation and health literacy. The Declaration underscores the necessity of a collective approach involving governments, healthcare providers, and communities to embed self-care into the primary healthcare framework, aiming for universal accessibility by 2030.

Self-care as a universal practice

As we stand at the cusp of 2030, the journey towards embedding self-care into the ethos of global healthcare systems is both promising and challenging. The collaborative efforts of academic institutions, healthcare professionals, policymakers and individuals are crucial in realising the vision of self-care as a universal practice. This special self-care focus in Open Access Government reflects where we are and offers a roadmap to where we need to be, marking the beginning of a new chapter in healthcare.

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