

Address by Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General World Health Organization

Address at the joint Inaugural Session of the
Twenty-eighth Health Ministers Meeting and the
Sixty-third Session of the Regional Committee for
South-East Asia
Bangkok, Thailand, 7 September 2010

Excellencies, honourable ministers, distinguished guests, Dr Samlee, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me thank the government of Thailand for hosting this Twenty eighth Health Ministers Meeting and the sixty-third session of the Regional Committee for South-East Asia. This is a fitting venue.

Thailand is well known for its achievements in public health. Let me mention just a few: a strong commitment by the government to primary health care, an innovative scheme for moving towards universal health coverage, and pioneering efforts to improve access to essential medicines.

Thailand, together with Sri Lanka, has achieved nearly universal coverage with skilled attendants at childbirth, with very little difference between rich and poor women.

These are laudable achievements. In fact, this region as a whole is leading the worldwide effort to ensure appropriate and affordable medicines for the long-term management of chronic diseases, including diabetes.

During this joint session, you will be discussing urbanization. This was the theme for this year's World Health Day, and it generated a great deal of attention and debate, also in the media.

Clearly, urban health matters. Clearly, this is an issue worthy of your high-level attention.

For the first time in history, more people are now living in urban settings than in rural areas. By the year 2030, an estimated six out of every ten people will be living in towns or cities, with the most explosive growth expected in Asia and Africa.

Cities concentrate people, opportunities, and services, including those for health and education. But cities also concentrate risks and hazards for health.

The examples are numerous: contamination of the food or water supply, high levels of air or noise pollution, a chemical spill, a disease outbreak, or a natural disaster.

Cities also tend to promote unhealthy lifestyles. These lifestyles are directly linked to obesity and the rise of chronic conditions, and these conditions are increasingly concentrated in the urban poor.

Urban poverty and squalor are strongly linked to social unrest, mental disorders, crime, violence, and outbreaks of disease associated with crowding and filth.

Let me also acknowledge the solidarity of this region in responding to the influenza pandemic.

Since 2006, WHO has supported the accelerated development and production of influenza vaccines in eleven low-and middle-income countries.

Thailand participated in technology transfer by conducting clinical trials of pandemic vaccine and following up with rigorous safety assessments.

Ladies and gentlemen,

On 10 August, I announced that the world was no longer in phase 6 of influenza pandemic alert. Epidemiological data from around the world indicated that the new H1N1 virus had largely run its course. As I stressed at the time, the decision to declare the pandemic over was based on a global assessment.

In the current post-pandemic period, we expect to see localized outbreaks of different magnitude, and some continuing “hot spots” will continue to show high levels of H1Ni transmission. This pattern is indeed being seen in a few parts of the world, including here in South-East Asia.

Let me remind you: the pandemic virus has not gone away. Based on experience with past pandemics, we expect the H1N1 virus to take on the behaviour of a seasonal influenza virus and continue to circulate for some years to come.

In the immediate post-pandemic period, the virus is likely to continue to cause serious illness in a younger age group. Protecting high-risk groups and maintaining vigilance are recommended actions.

Some countries are continuing to protect at-risk groups with pandemic vaccine, and this policy is fully in line with WHO recommendations.

In fact the actions of health authorities in India, in terms of vigilance, quick detection and treatment and recommended vaccination, provide a good model of how other countries may need to respond in the immediate post-pandemic period.

**I thank all countries in this region for their responsiveness during the pandemic and wish this Regional Committee a most productive session.
Thank you.**