

Opening Remarks

By
Dr Samlee Plianbangchang
Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia

At

Seventh Global Vaccine Research Forum Meeting

Bangkok, Thailand
3-5 December 2006

The Seventh Global Vaccine Research Forum Meeting

3-5 December 2006

Bangkok, Thailand

Opening Remarks by

**DR SAMLEE PLIANBANGCHANG
REGIONAL DIRECTOR, WHO SOUTH-EAST ASIA**

Good morning,

Distinguished participants; honourable guests; ladies and gentlemen;

With great pleasure, I welcome you all to the Seventh Meeting of the Global Vaccine Research Forum 2006. This is the first meeting of the Forum in the South-East Asia Region. This meeting is being held at a crucial period, when Asia is the focus of a potential global influenza pandemic – a pandemic that threatens millions of lives, and could possibly have a devastating impact on the global economy. What the world is waiting for anxiously is a vaccine to be available in time to avert the threat of the pandemic. I would like to thank all organizers, including WHO headquarters, for holding this important meeting in our Region.

More than 40 per cent of the global disease burden are accounted for by the South-East Asia Region. Consequently, vaccine-preventable diseases are our important regional concern. Therefore, the reduction of mortality and morbidity from these diseases in the SEA Region will contribute significantly to the worldwide decrease of the burden due to vaccine-preventable diseases.

While the search for vaccines to combat new and emerging infectious diseases is an important pursuit, it is necessary that we find effective vaccines against some of the age-old scourges that continue to ravage humanity.

In this regard, I am happy to note that for the Global Vaccine Research Forum the need to find effective vaccines against tuberculosis, malaria and HIV/AIDS is a priority topic in all its meetings.

Despite all out-efforts, tuberculosis still causes nine million new cases and over two million deaths every year. Of these, three million new cases and more than half a million deaths occur are in the South-East Asia Region alone. Similarly, 350 to 500 million cases of malaria occur globally every year with over a million deaths. While the battle against these ancient diseases continues, more recent public health challenges, such as HIV/AIDS are exacting an even more devastating toll on the world. An estimated 40.6 million people worldwide were living with HIV at the end of 2005, and over 3.1 million succumbed to the ravages of AIDS. Due to the sheer size of the population in Asia, the estimated number of people living with HIV, and those dying from AIDS in this continent are significant and are rising rapidly. Last year, it was estimated that Asia had 1.1 million new cases with over 8.3 million living with HIV. AIDS claims over 500,000 lives every year. However, antimicrobials against these diseases have given us breathing space. But the microbes have evolved faster than we could find new ways to overcome their resistance, or discover new antimicrobials. Therefore, the only lasting solution is to seek for viable and effective vaccines against diseases of major public health concern.

Today, there is new hope and renewed vigour in the field of vaccine development and immunization. This, in part, is due to the rapid development in technology and molecular sciences. It is also due to additional resources provided by charitable organizations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the formation of new global alliances, like the GAVI.

On behalf of WHO in the SEA Region, I highly commend and deeply thank the foundations, organizations and individuals who are bringing hope to the world's poor. I am happy to see that this year, a satellite symposium on Japanese Encephalitis or JE and dengue preceded the main meeting of the Forum. JE and dengue are major public health problems in many countries of the Asia-Pacific Region. I hope that the GAVI or some of the other development partners would support the endemic countries to introduce JE vaccination. It is now clear that immunization is the most effective and the only long-term

and viable intervention to control JE. While JE remains primarily a disease of the rural poor, an urban menace, dengue, is affecting more and more cities across Asia. The rapid rise of mega cities and, unfortunately, the often poor civic infrastructures in these cities create a perfect environment for dengue to establish and flourish. In this context vaccine against dengue would truly be a boon. And it is my hope that the scientific community succeeds in finding one soon.

Several countries in this part of the world are major suppliers of vaccines for routine immunization. The South-East Asia Region has a great potential to participate, and to contribute to global research and development in vaccines.

I hope that this Forum will help focus attention on such a potential in the Region. Today, there is a wide divide in access to immunization between children in the poor and the rich countries. This divide can only be narrowed by investing in research and development for vaccines that are necessary for the developing world. Forums, such as this, are important to rectify the issue of divergence of global markets for vaccine supply, which has a significant impact on poor countries.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, I wish this meeting of the Forum all success. And I wish all the distinguished participants a pleasant stay in Bangkok.

Now, I declare the Seventh Meeting of the Global Vaccine Research Forum open.

Thank You.