

Inaugural Address

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

At

Thirty-fourth National Conference of
Indian Association of Preventive and Social Medicine

AIIMS, New Delhi
22 February 2007

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Dr T.S.R. Sai, President, Indian Association of Preventive and Social Medicine; Dr Chandrakant S. Pandav, Chairman, Organizing Committee; Dr P. Venugopal, Director, All India Institute of Medical Sciences; Dr Cecilio Adorna, UNICEF Representative, India Country Office; Dr Rajesh Kumar, Secretary-General, IAPSM; Dr Bir Singh, Organizing Secretary; Distinguished participants; Ladies and gentlemen,

I am privileged and honoured to deliver the inaugural address at this important National Conference. The Indian Association of Preventive and Social Medicine must be congratulated for organizing the Conference which will contribute significantly to the attainment of "India – Vision 2020: Strengthening Public Health – translating ideas into action". This is the theme of this Conference.

Taking into account the level of development in India today, the theme of the Conference is timely indeed. I am sure India can become a developed nation by the year 2020 as envisioned by His Excellency Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, the President of India. Certainly, India has the potential, especially in the areas of know-how and human resources. India has the potential to move forward to that level of development by 2020. Only that health security for the entire population has to be the overriding concern in the process of national development.

Good health for all citizens has to be ensured throughout such a process. The process that places special emphasis on health development in the community and at the grassroots level. The process that gives priority attention to health of the poor, under

privileged, marginalized and vulnerable. The process that ensures reaching the unreached in all localities in the country.

It is universally accepted that health is at the centre of national socio-economic development; and health for all can lead to poverty reduction in any country. Therefore, good health for all people is an important requisite for the progress of any nation.

Balanced development in health care and services to ensure health for all people is the key issue in the development process today. This is especially in the developing world, where a large segment of the population is poor, underprivileged, deprived, marginalized and vulnerable.

Balanced development in this context means more efforts and more resources to be invested at community and grassroots levels. It is the development that gives adequate attention to primary care, focussing on health risks and health determinants. The development that attempts to keep people healthy through health promotion. The development that can prevent people from becoming sick through disease control and prevention. These are cost-effective interventions to reduce the disease burden in the community and in the entire population.

Primary prevention in health is one of the cost-effective strategies to reduce poverty in any community in developing countries. Since long, our health care and services have been concentrated in areas of secondary care. The care that places emphasis on treating the sick, especially in the medical institutions. Our health systems have therefore been overly oriented to curative and rehabilitative services; at the cost of promotive and preventive care.

To shift the emphasis from disease-based health services towards risk and determinant-based health systems, is really a formidable task. However, for our future efforts in health development for good health for all, this is a challenge indeed. As a

prerequisite, we need to have the right workforce to engineer health systems towards the desired direction. To move efficiently along this course of primary prevention, we need a public health and community-based health workforce. The workforce that can effectively develop and implement public health programmes. The programmes that deal primarily with health promotion, disease control and prevention. The programmes that look after the health of the public anywhere.

We need the workforce that can mobilize people from all walks of life and involve them in the movement for health for all. The workforce that can ensure reaching the unreached everywhere.

Within this context, I would like to emphasize the critical role of community-based health workers. The workers who work at the grassroots, rendering services to the poor, underprivileged, marginalized and vulnerable. The workforce that can go anywhere in the country to reach the unreached. Community-based health workers are an important group of people who can greatly contribute to the reduction of sickness; and the reduction of disease burden in the community.

To ensure balanced development in health care and services, we need to pay special attention to the public health workforce. The workforce that also includes community-based health workers. We need to reorient our strategy in the development of human resources for health to this new direction. To be able to do this successfully we need strong and sustained political commitment and support. As the requisite of this change, we need unwavering and long-term policy and strategy back-up at the national level.

In this connection, I am very happy to see that the Government of India has a clear policy direction to move forward towards public health and community health development. The Rural Health Mission and Public Health Foundation are a clear evidence of the Government's intention and commitment in this regard.

The Indian Association of Preventive and Social Medicine has an important role to play in this challenging task. The Association can help in strengthening and reorienting health infrastructures in community and at the grassroots levels. This is to ensure health systems based on the primary health care approach.

The Department of Preventive and Social Medicine or Department of Community Health in medical colleges throughout the country can play a critical role in the production of public health professionals and practitioners. They can also contribute in a big way in the development of community-based health workers. With the current government health policy, Preventive and Social Medicine can make an important contribution to the achievement of India-Vision 2020.

WHO has placed emphasis in its collaboration with the Government of India on development in the public health area. We are also ready to collaborate with any organizations and institutions that are involved in the development of public health workforce and community-based health workers.

Once again, I sincerely congratulate the Indian Association of Preventive and Social Medicine for organizing this important National Conference. In the course of this meeting, I am sure, many new ideas will be generated. I am also confident that these useful ideas will be “translated into action” without delay.

Finally, I wish the distinguished participants all success in their deliberations. And, I wish the Indian Association of Preventive and Social Medicine all the best in its endeavours towards health for all through Public Health and the primary health care approach.

Thank you.