

Address by

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Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia***

At the

World TB Day 2010

***24 March 2010
WHO SEARO, New Delhi***

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Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia***

Colleagues;

Today, 24 March, is World TB Day. Once again, this day reminds us of the challenges in TB control. Despite a very high burden of the disease, the South-East Asia Region continues to make significant progress in TB control.

With the unwavering commitment and sustained efforts of all stakeholders, including the private sector and medical colleges, over 2.2 million TB patients were diagnosed and registered for treatment in 2009. In the Region, almost 15 million patients have been cured during the last 10 years and several thousand TB deaths have been averted. It is estimated that TB prevalence in the Region has been halved, and TB mortality had been reduced by a third by the end of 2009. These figures indicate that we are on track to reach the MDG targets for TB.

Under the Stop TB Strategy, several countries have already established services for tackling multidrug resistant tuberculosis. Efforts are also being made to prevent extensively drug resistant TB (XDR TB); XDR TB is an emerging daunting challenge in TB control today.

Furthermore, national TB and AIDS control programmes have worked together to deliver a service package for HIV-associated TB. This service has now been extended to over 600 million people in the Region. Recognizing that services delivered through regular health systems alone cannot reach all TB patients, national TB programmes in the Region started engaging a wide range of partners in the early 1990s.

As a result, several thousand additional service providers are now working with national tuberculosis control programmes (NTPs). Where such measures are in place, the number of case notifications has increased by up to 25%, and this helps us raise treatment success rates to over 90%. National TB control programmes have also focused their attention on working with civil society. Community-based TB services are expanding and demonstrating higher service utilization. This has led to better outcomes in TB treatment and care.

TB is a disease of poverty. It has social, economic and environmental implications, which need our due consideration in framing control measures. Social and economic support to TB control programmes is necessary for successful TB services. The value of this support has been clearly demonstrated.

Community-based poverty alleviation schemes help TB patients overcome social and economic barriers in getting access to treatment. While much has been achieved, national TB control programmes in the Region still face many challenges. This is especially the case with scaling up and sustaining services to cover the entire target population. In many countries, there are other major issues involved, such as:

- language and cultural diversities that pose important barriers to accessibility;
- economic difficulties that prevent access to treatment and care;
- rapid urbanization that leads to overcrowdedness in the urban environment;
- and large scale displacements of population who are forced to live in poor environmental conditions.

Besides efforts to strengthen national control programmes to deliver essential services through the primary health care approach, concerted action by several sectors is essential to help ensure that the services reach the most vulnerable and those who find it hardest to seek care.

Colleagues,

The theme for World TB Day this year is “On the Move against Tuberculosis”. It calls on all of us to review what has been achieved so far, and to look forward to better planning for more innovative ways to fight TB, as well as better management of the control programme. We need to pay more attention to social, economic and environmental factors.

Nutritional aspects of the programme also need our attention to help ensure successful treatments, by building up the general health condition and immune systems of

the patients to fight against tuberculous bacilli more effectively. Given the nature of the TB epidemic, our continued, unwavering commitment to control interventions will be critical indeed. These much-needed services have to be delivered more effectively and efficiently to all target groups. The TB control programmes have also to overcome social and economic barriers that prevent people from getting access to TB care.

We must not lose sight of our goal, the goal of eliminating tuberculosis as a public health problem. This day, World TB Day, marks our continuing struggle against this age-old scourge. Let us renew and reaffirm our untiring commitment to achieving this goal, the elimination of tuberculosis.

Thank you.