

*Opening Remarks*

*By*  
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*At*

*Inauguration of*  
*The SEA Regional Conference on Epidemiology*

*New Delhi*  
*India*

**8 March 2010**

# **The SEA Regional Conference on Epidemiology**

**8-10 March 2010**

***WHO/SEARO, New Delhi***

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Your Excellency, Shri Kapil Sibal, Honorable Minister for Human Resource Development, Government of India; distinguished participants; honorable guests and partners; ladies and gentlemen:

With great pleasure I welcome you all to the SEA Regional Conference on Epidemiology. The conference is jointly organized by the WHO South-East Asia Regional Office and the Indian Association of Epidemiology. I overwhelmingly thank the Honorable Minister for Human Resource Development for accepting to grace the inauguration of the meeting.

In view of the current worldwide health challenges, the broad topic of the conference is indeed timely. As far as the South-East Asia Region is concerned, the health situation has undergone a remarkable change over the past several decades.

The achievements overall from socioeconomic development and from the improved capacity of health-care systems have significantly contributed to the longevity and quality of life of people in the Region. The availability of vaccines and antimicrobials has helped to

effectively reduce the impact of infectious diseases. Access to quality health services at all levels has substantially improved. Many of the erstwhile “epidemic-prone diseases” have been brought under control.

However, there is still a long way to go to attain the goal of quality health care for all people. The ideal of “equity in health” with due regard to social justice is yet to be universally achieved nationally and internationally. The threat from communicable diseases continues, with new virulent strains or agents. The older menace from infectious agents keeps re-emerging. Recent global experience, such as the H1N1 influenza pandemic, has underlined the need for continued vigilance and preparedness.

Furthermore, demographic transition, with increasing longevity has brought about an epidemiological transition in disease patterns. Diseases due to unhealthy lifestyles already contribute to the majority of morbidity and mortality worldwide. In addition, we have the intractable problem of maternal and newborn mortality.

This problem requires urgent action, if we are to achieve Millennium Development Goals 4 and 5 by the target date. In order to ensure an effective response to these very disparate issues, there is a need for a common bond to hold the various diverse elements of health systems together. This challenge requires evidence-based decisions and evidence-based actions for comprehensive and integrated development and strengthening of health systems.

This is where epidemiology comes in; it fills the need for evidence-based knowledge and information as a basis for such decisions and actions. Epidemiology is the study of factors contributing to health and illness of populations. Epidemiology is an environment - and ecology-based body of knowledge about health and disease, which are multifaceted and multifactoral.

More specifically, epidemiology is about the interplay and the interactions between human hosts, disease agents and their environments. It serves as a rationally logical foundation for public health and preventive medicine.

Through the application of epidemiological principles, health systems are provided with evidence-based knowledge, the most important tool for their functioning. Knowledge about the distribution and extent of health problems and health issues enables them to be tackled through public health interventions. Together with the information on health risks and health determinants, this knowledge will lead to the development and implementation of rational policies and strategies for the provision of effective, promotive and preventive health care to the community.

Evidence-based information can certainly help effectively in advocacy and education for health at all levels, in all populations. This information is also extremely important for education and training of all categories of health workforce.

Ladies and gentlemen;

This Regional Conference on Epidemiology is one in a series of WHO activities in the Region. It aims towards further strengthening of health systems capacity in public health in countries of the Region, so that the countries are able to face today's health challenges more effectively through public health interventions.

With these words, let me finally conclude by wishing you all every success in your deliberations during the course of the Conference.

Thank you.