

Address by

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

At the

Joint Inauguration of RC 64 and 29th HMM

***6 September 2011
Jaipur, Rajasthan, India***

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Excellency, Ghulam Nabi Azad, Minister of Health and Family Welfare, the Government of India; Excellencies, Ministers of Health from Countries of WHO SEAR; Distinguished country representatives; Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General, World Health Organization; Dr V.M. Katoch, Secretary (HR), Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India; Mr B.N. Sharma, Principal Secretary (HFW), Government of Rajasthan; Honorable guests; Ladies and gentlemen;

On behalf of WHO/SEAR, it is my privilege to warmly welcome you all to the 29th Meeting of Health Ministers of Health and the 64th Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia. I sincerely thank the Government of India for hosting these two important meetings in this beautiful city of Jaipur.

Excellencies,

As a dynamic member of WHO and as host of the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia, India has consistently demonstrated unwavering

commitment to the mandate of the Organization in promoting the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health. The National Rural Health Mission launched in 2005 to revitalize the primary health care approach in the country is another shining example of this commitment. I wish to put on record WHO's deep appreciation of India's long-standing involvement in the work of the Organization.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The current key health indicators provide clear evidence of significant progress in health development in SEAR. Among other achievements, all countries have reached the leprosy elimination targets. HIV and Tb prevalence are showing a downward trend in many countries. And we are very close to achieving the goal of polio eradication. However, in the area of maternal, newborn and child health, a few countries are facing formidable challenges in their efforts towards MDGs 4 and 5.

There are also troublesome trends which need our urgent attention. It is evident that the burden of chronic noncommunicable diseases in the Region is expected to rise steeply during the coming decade. These also include among others injuries; disabilities; and mental disorders.

Mortality due to NCDs has already surpassed that of communicable diseases.

This situation reflects the inability of our health systems to mainstream health promotion along with disease prevention through a population-based primary health care approach.

Most chronic noncommunicable diseases need long-term, or even life-long medical treatment, a situation that creates an additional “economic burden” for individuals and families. This trend will significantly contribute to increasing or even skyrocketing health care cost. We need to do much more in “primary prevention” of NCDs through the efforts of multiple stakeholders and partners; the efforts that can be efficiently coordinated by robust health systems. I hope that Your Excellencies, when attending the UN NCD Summit in New York later this month would voice our regional concerns in this regard.

Excellencies,

Antimicrobial resistance was the theme of this year’s World Health Day.

WHO has been continually advocating “rational use of medicines”, including antibiotics. In order to effectively control microbial resistance to antibiotics and in order not to allow “superbugs” to develop in our Region we need to exert much more efforts in advocating the “rational use of antibiotics”. Environmental threats to health due to rapid population growth and urbanization are becoming critical challenges to the majority of countries in the Region.

And climate change will certainly exacerbate the already heavy burden on our over-stretched health systems. We need to effectively mitigate the health impact of climate change through urgently strengthening our public health programmes.

Immunization is the most cost-effective public health intervention to prevent infectious diseases among children. Compared with other WHO Regions; SEA has a relatively low coverage of routine immunization. Concerted action is urgently required to intensify our efforts on routine immunization. We have the most rational reason to agree that 2012 be the Year of Intensification of Routine Immunization in SEAR.

Ladies and gentlemen

Public health interventions place health promotion and disease prevention at their core; these interventions are vital in controlling and reducing disease burden be it communicable or noncommunicable diseases. For this to happen, we need to strengthen our public health systems for effective support to the implementation of PHC principle.

And, critically important, public health work has to be given due emphasis in national health policies and in allocation of national health resources. We need to ensure that public health work will not lag behind in our national health development endeavours.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish the Honorable Health Ministers and distinguished country representatives very fruitful deliberations during the course of their meetings.

I sincerely thank the local organizing committee for the excellent arrangements made for the two meetings.

And I wish you all an enjoyable stay in Jaipur.

Thank you.