

Opening Remarks

by

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at

World Health Day Press Conference

***Committee Room, SEARO, New Delhi
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WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia Region
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Committee Room, World Health House
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I am very happy to welcome our colleagues from the media. This is the World Health Day, 7 April 2004. WHO constitution came into force on this day in 1948. This is my first interaction with the media since I took over as Regional Director on the first of March this year. We in WHO fully recognize that media plays a crucial role in the promotion of health of the public. The media provide factual information, raise questions, and advocate for policy change. We acknowledge this important partnership and assure you of our support in providing valid technical information, to help raise awareness on issues of public health concern.

As you may already be aware, World Health Day this year focuses on injury prevention, with the theme: "Road Safety Is No Accident". On this occasion, WHO is releasing "The World Report on Road Traffic Injury Prevention" which provides a global picture on road traffic injuries and fatalities. It also identifies major risk factors, intervention measures and makes recommendations for action.

Globally, road traffic accidents kill about 1.2 million people every year. Another 20 million are severely injured.

In the WHO South-East Asia Region, in 2001, an estimated 354,000 people died from road traffic injuries, and 6.2 million people were admitted to hospitals. Every hour, 40 people die as a result of road traffic injuries in the Region. Over the next two decades, this figure is predicted to rise by 144 per cent making it the largest increase among all WHO Regions. On the other

hand, in the developed countries during the same period, road traffic injuries are expected to decline by 27 percent.

In our Region, the increase in road traffic injuries and deaths have resulted from the rapid increase in motor vehicles and mobility. This is because of inadequate concern for road safety. The direct cost of road traffic injuries to countries in the Region is an estimated US\$ 14 billion. In addition, there is the cost that families have to bear in terms of suffering and dependence due to disability.

There is much that can be done to reduce the risk of road traffic injuries, and mitigate their consequences. The first step is to change the mind set of the public. To most people, “accident” implies that the event is random and unpredictable. This leads to negligence and inadequate precaution with regard to prevention of injuries. Current evidence, however, shows that road traffic injuries are preventable to a great extent. In this context, I would urge the media to help in shaping this understanding. Traffic injury prevention requires multi-sectoral cooperation and multi-disciplinary inputs. What is needed is to develop a broad based partnership between governments, vehicle manufacturers, traffic management authorities and civil society to ensure effective application of various measures.

Motor vehicle accidents are the critical issues in transportation and mobility. Today, they have become a major health problem demanding a global response based on public health approaches. Our efforts should, therefore, focus on the safety of people, based on science and engineering.

In order to alleviate human suffering from injuries, health facilities must be geared to provide an effective and efficient response. They must be enabled to provide improved care to those injured. For this, we need to enhance the

capacity of the public health system to provide early and optimal pre-hospital care, hospital-based care and rehabilitation services.

It is heartening to note however that some countries have taken initiatives to set up a network of comprehensive trauma centres.

WHO is committed to support Member Countries in enhancing their capacity to deal with this epidemic of road traffic injuries more efficiently and effectively. This would be through providing assistance in gathering evidence, sharing good practices, providing tools and guidelines for prevention and care, and strengthening the capacity of human resources.

As I said earlier, the media can play an important role. They can be powerful advocates for strong laws, as well as for implementation of proven scientific measures in order to prevent injuries in many cases, and to mitigate their outcomes in most cases. The media can create public awareness by presenting data that reflect the urgency and the high cost in human and economic terms.

The media can be both a watchdog for monitoring effective implementation of preventive measures, and a catalyst for action to promote road safety. WHO will be very happy to provide evidence-based information in this regard. I am sure, our combined efforts, together with the efforts of governments and civil society would help reduce the number of road traffic injuries in the countries of the South-East Asia Region.

Thank you.