

*Remarks*

*by*

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*at the*

*Opening Session of the Immunization Meetings  
(AEFI Communication Workshop, EPI Managers  
Meeting and Technical Consultative Group Meeting)*

*New Delhi, India  
9 August 2004*

**Remarks of the Regional Director at the  
Opening Session of the Immunization Meetings  
(AEFI Communications Workshop, EPI Managers Meeting  
and Technical Consultative Group Meeting) at  
Taj Mahal Hotel, New Delhi, India, 9-13 August 2004**

Dr. Sadig Rasheed, UNICEF Regional Director for South Asia,

Dr Ester Guluma, Deputy UNICEF RD for SA,

Distinguished participants,

Colleagues,

Ladies and gentlemen,

- It is a great pleasure for me to be at the opening session of this series of meetings dealing with various aspects of Immunization, including communication which is to take place first today.
- This is truly a special event, as it provides an opportunity to reinforce collaboration between WHO and UNICEF, in order to meet our common objectives on immunization.
- I am particularly pleased to see many colleagues from different regions and different organizations attending these meetings.
- I look forward to a fruitful exchange of views and experiences on this occasion.

Colleagues,

- It is universally accepted that communicable diseases observe no boundaries.

- Keeping this in mind, while trying to overcome political barriers between countries, public health leaders such as all of us must address common challenges on the ground, in order to make health improvement in this part of the world possible.
- This event deserves attention, because it is the critical time to ensure successful implementation of the immunization programmes; and reaching the immunization goals.
- The goals that will importantly contribute to better health of our children.
- While the meetings this week will address a broad range of topics, let me focus briefly at this moment on only three major immunization issues.
- These are: polio eradication, surveillance, and injection safety.

Distinguished participants,

- Polio is now limited to six endemic countries in the world.
- Three of them; India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan; all are in the regions covered by WHO/SEARO and UNICEF/ROSA.
- In spite of this situation, we can, however, say with confidence that a remarkable progress has been made towards the achievement of polio eradication in our regions.
- The number of polio cases in these countries this year up to the moment is the lowest ever.

- This provides us with the best opportunity yet to eradicate this scourge in the very near future.
- These gatherings will address the key strategies needed for the final push to ensure reaching the eradication target in the remaining endemic countries within a defined time frame.
- The virologists who are here will discuss the efficiency and effectiveness of the performance of laboratory network; and provide advice and guidance on containment procedures.
- And, perhaps most importantly, the discussions will also dwell on vaccine options in the post eradication era.
- WHO will be issuing guidelines on this matter in the near future, in order to help ensure our preparedness for post eradication surveillance.
- The meetings this week will provide opportunity to participants from countries to express their views on how to deal with the transition from OPV, once eradication is achieved.
- Another very key issue is surveillance.
- The AFP surveillance networks have been critical in guiding the polio eradication efforts in the Regions.
- While these networks must continue to focus on AFP until the certification stage is completed; the surveillance in Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Indonesia has already been expanded to cover other vaccine preventable diseases.

- In this connection, I hope that we would also discuss how the valuable human, infrastructure and material resources that have helped us in Polio eradication could be channeled to address other communicable diseases, especially in strengthening routine immunization programme.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- As far as injection safety is concerned, a recent national survey in India found that over 65% of all immunization cases are unsafe.
- Unfortunately, this is also commonly the case in other countries in our Regions.
- Although, all countries in the Regions are introducing auto-disposable syringes, these have not yet been fully used in the EPI programme.
- A major challenge in this connection is how to dispose the syringes which have already been used.
- The distinguished participants may provide an update on the options for safe and sustainable management of sharps waste; and advice on the operational modalities and procedures on this matter.

Colleagues,

- Dealing with Adverse Events Following Immunization or AEFI, represents a bridge between the issues of surveillance and immunization safety.
- Unsafe injections create further potential for AEFI, which can entirely undermine public confidence in immunization.
- Most countries have now established surveillance systems for AEFI, which generates information that needs to be rapidly addressed; and steps are taken to maintain such a confidence through effective communication responses.
- The workshop starting today, will provide practical, hands-on experience in dealing with this important issue of immunization.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- Immunization remains a moral imperative and a human right.
- Our efforts should be guided by the principle of equitably safe injections of high quality vaccine to all those at risk of contracting the diseases.
- This is a formidable challenge, but one that can be met successfully through our tireless joint endeavours among us – countries, UNICEF, WHO and other partners.

- Colleagues, the Former First Lady of USA, Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”
- I am sure if she were here today, she would agree that those who dream of reducing the burden of vaccine preventable diseases for the children of our regions have a special claim on that future.
- I am confident that we can realize that future through the intensified efforts of all of us.
- Finally, I wish you all productive deliberations, successful conclusions, and enjoyable stay in Delhi.
- Thank you.