

***Keynote Address***

***by***

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***on***

***“Equity and Responsibilities in Providing Access to  
Medicines: The Roles of Physicians, Researchers,  
Manufacturers and Governments”***

***at***

***An International Conference on Health Research and  
Access to Medicines in Asia and the Western Pacific: Forum  
for Ethical Review Committees in  
Asia & the Western Pacific – FERCAP/SIDCER***

***Chiang Mai, Thailand  
13-14 December 2004***

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*“Equity and Responsibilities in Providing Access to Medicines: The Roles of  
Physicians, Researchers, Manufacturers and Governments”*

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Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia**

Mr Chairman,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

- First of all allow me to thank the organizers of the Conference for inviting me to deliver a keynote address at this august gathering.
- It is an honour and privilege for me.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- According to the constitutional principle of World Health Organization, “Enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition”.

- Health is therefore universally recognized as a fundamental right with its moral and ethical dimensions.
- The international framework for human rights also provides a powerful set of moral and legal instruments to strengthen people's health.
- The right to health, as enshrined in the international treaties, can be met, to a large extent, through equitable access to essential health services, including medicines.
- Let us look at this issue not only from the technical, but also the moral and ethical perspective.
- FERCAP, by fostering the development of ethical review committees, has played an important role in promoting the ethical value in such accessibility.
- The first expected outcome of the conference, "the contribution to an international resolution on the availability of medicines" is really important.
- During the conference, we will focus our attention on medicines being made available and accessible to the population at large.
- During the past 25 years, the world population having regular access to essential medicines has gone up from 50 to only 66 percent.
- This slow progress leaves 2 billion people, especially in developing countries, without adequate coverage for such medicines.
- The people who suffer the most are from the poorest segments of the population.

- There are many facets that can be strengthened to improve access to medicines.
- It has to be assured that a limited number of essential medicines are always available to all persons at all times, through the use of available resources.
- It has been universally recognized that the supply of essential medicines should be on the basis of need, rather than on the ability to pay.
- About 50% of the medicines purchased by people are wasted, because they are prescribed inappropriately, and purchased at a much higher price.
- There are many reasons why access to limited number of good quality medicines by the needy people remains an elusive goal.
- In spite of the pioneering work carried out by World Health Organization and other international agencies, access to medicines has been increased only in some countries.
- Access to medicines links closely with their rational use.
- The players pushing forward the concept of rational use of medicines are too few, and are confined to only some governments, a few international agencies, and some non-governmental organizations.
- There are four groups of key players in this important area – physicians, researchers, manufacturers, and governments.

## **What are the responsibilities of physicians in ensuring access to medicines?**

- As professionals, doctors are not expected to have any other overriding considerations than providing the best services to their patients.
- This is a part of the ethics of medical profession; and the reason that patients trust doctors.
- Ethics and trust are the cornerstones on which the doctor-patient relationship has functioned for ages.
- The doctors have the sole responsibility of seeing what is best for their patients, whether it is medicines, services or advice.
- They have moral and ethical obligation to consciously prescribe the most cost-effective medicines for their patients.
- The WHO Ethical Criteria for Medicinal Drug Promotion clearly states that drug advertisements should be aimed at promoting health through rational drug use, rather than just simply selling drugs for financial gain.
- Governments, by enacting appropriate regulations based on these criteria, can help doctors prescribe medicines rationally.
- Physicians should attempt, as much as possible, to prescribe drugs within the Lists of Essential Medicines, which are prepared and regularly updated as part of the effort to enhance access.
- Drugs included in the List are those intended to satisfy priority needs of the people, selected on the basis of efficacy, safety and cost effectiveness.

- If prescribers – physicians or others, could restrict their prescriptions to these medicines; not only will there be better therapeutics; but there would also be sizeable cost savings for patients.
- Purchase of essential medicines through pooled procurement, can result in considerable reduction in expenditure on drugs.
- These savings can be used to procure more medicines, thereby increasing their availability and accessibility.
- Education of the consumers to create awareness regarding access to medicines is an area that needs adequate attention.
- Patients or consumers as knowledgeable partners can be very powerful advocates to improve this access.
- It is the important responsibility of physicians to inform the patients about medicines they are prescribing.
- Doctors and other prescribers should fulfill this role, and regard it as part of their strict obligation to society in this context.
- Access to medicines therefore must be linked with rational prescribing and good compliance; which is, of course, in the hands of both the doctors and patients.
- Physicians have an important role to play in the development of tools to facilitate rational prescribing and drug use.
- This may include the development of training modules to be included in the undergraduate curricula of doctors, pharmacists, nurses, and other health service providers.

- Physicians together with other relevant professionals need to prepare a Code of Conduct on the relationship between medical profession and pharmaceutical industry.

### **What are the responsibilities of researchers in ensuring access to medicines?**

- Researchers play a critical role in focusing their work in the areas that would lead to an increase in access to medicines.
- Research may include, among others, drug procurement and distribution; financing and pricing.
- Behavioural aspects of people, including those relating to compliance should also be the areas for studies.
- The research outcomes may lead to modification and improvement in the management of national health programmes, resulting in enhancing access to medicines.
- This type of research, therefore, needs a different mix of disciplines, which also includes economists, management specialists and social anthropologists.
- We need experts in health systems research to see that medicines reach all health facilities, and are available at all time, especially at primary health care level in the community.

### **What are the responsibilities of the pharmaceutical manufacturers in ensuring access to medicines?**

- Responsibilities of pharmaceutical industry should not only be limited to areas of drug development, production and marketing; but also in disseminating correct information about the drugs.
- The industry should work closely with other relevant players to ensure medicine accessibility.
- The manufacturers should be socially conscious, and try to develop new drugs where there is a great need, even though the profits may not be large.
- Some proportion of their enormous budgets for advertisements, should be kept aside for developing new drugs for diseases prevailing in the developing world.
- There are several enlightening examples, whereby this has been clearly demonstrated.
- One pharmaceutical industry, in collaboration with World Health Organization, discovered a drug for river blindness, which has been provided free of cost to patients in Africa.
- Pharmaceutical industry has all the information about the new drugs that it is marketing.
- This information needs to be disseminated and shared with others whenever it is ethically warranted.
- The industry should provide appropriate, correct and timely information to the medical profession on every drug being introduced in the market.

## **What are the responsibilities of governments towards their citizens in the access to medicines?**

- Health care is one of the most important fundamental requirements that citizens expect from their governments.
- This is especially in respect of guidance, provision, regulation, and control.
- Within the resources available, different governments use different approaches in providing medicines to their people.
- The key role of the government is to develop measures to ensure equity in access to medicines by all who are in need.
- The ethical responsibility in this regard is inextricably linked with the rational use of drugs, which is in the hands of service providers.
- No programme aimed at enhancing access to medicines can succeed without extensive training and continuing education of all concerned health staff.
- The government should encourage medical and public health institutions and professional societies to organize such training and education programmes.
- Courses in logistics of procurement, storage and distribution of drugs, and rational prescribing would be the important areas.
- The curricula for health service providers need to be reviewed and revised to include the relevant contents, which would enable these health staff to ensure access to medicines.

- The government needs to develop a robust drug policy based on the principles of ethics, equity and transparency.
- This policy should be strictly and uniformly enforced throughout the country.
- The government should ensure that essential medicines are procured through the most efficient system, which guarantees their availability for people in need at all time.
- The government should protect the public, as far as possible, from unjustified and unethical advertisements.
- This is easier said than done.
- The relevant laws need to be vigorously enforced; and if necessary, these laws may be reviewed and strengthened.
- The government has the responsibility for ensuring that the prices of essential medicines are kept at a level, which is affordable by all people.
- There are various ways of doing this, and one may be to provide tax exemptions for special categories of medicines, such as those for life saving.
- The steep decrease in the price of antiretroviral drugs for HIV/AIDS in the past few years has shown the effectiveness of the concerted efforts by all concerned partners.
- This is an illustration of how to lower the drug price through an internationally collective endeavour.

- The Government should support health systems research to ensure proper management of the national drug procurement and distribution system.
- Another unique role of the Governments is to empower people to be able to look after their own health through an effective educational process.
- Medicines are playing important role in self and family care, as far as health is concerned.

Distinguished participants,

- Now, I turn from a general concern to an area of particular interest to the developing world.
- This is the area of new drugs for tropical diseases.
- Although over 1,000 new drugs had entered the market within the past 25 years, less than 1% of those were for tropical diseases, which affect 80% of the world population.
- This obviously raises moral and ethical questions about choices of developing new drugs.
- The development of new drugs should not be considered as only a commercial enterprise.
- These are areas where governments, both in the developed and developing world should be addressing together on moral and ethical ground.
- Developing new drugs requires significant investments.

- Naturally, the pharmaceutical industry looks for a financial return from their efforts.
- Governments, to a certain extent, can develop measures to regulate work of the industry, and can, therefore, influence it.
- Developing new drugs for the unmet health needs of people suffering from tropical diseases is not only a technical issue.
- It has to be seen as the global community fulfilling its responsibility for meeting the fundamental right to health of the 80% of the world population.

Distinguished participants,

- In conclusion, I would like to underline that health is not simply a technical, but a social and moral issue.
- It is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, but is a fundamental right, in which the highest attainable level of health and well-being of people is aspired.
- Physicians, pharmaceutical industry, researchers and governments have legal, ethical, moral and professional responsibilities for ensuring the realization of this right for all.
- As a part of this obligation, it is important to develop and implement measures to ensure availability of and equitable access to quality medicines.

- Many countries have included health as a fundamental right in their constitutions, whereby respective governments have the sole responsibility for fulfilling this basic right of all their citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- I may not have brought anything new to the distinguished participants; all these have been discussed at various fora many many times, but only to realize them.
- Nonetheless, I would like to urge all of us to join hands together, in promoting and supporting the achievements of the goal of accessibility to quality medicines.
- This will be our important contribution to the fulfilment of fundamental right to health of all people.

Thank you.