

***Opening Remarks***

***by***

***Dr Samlee Plianbangchang  
Regional Director, WHO/SEARO***

***at***

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

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

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Medicines in Asia and the Western Pacific: Forum for Ethical  
Review Committees in  
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Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia**

Mr Chairman,

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

- I am very pleased to have the opportunity to attend this International Conference.
- The impressive list of co-sponsors, the wide range of countries represented, the large and diverse group of health researchers, and those professionals involved in health care; signify the interest and the importance of the topics being covered by the conference.
- Medicines are a vital element of medical care and public health interventions.
- If used rationally, medicines can bring us a long way in curing diseases and cutting transmission of disease agents.
- However, to make quality medicines available and accessible to all people is really a formidable challenge indeed.

- It is estimated that about 30 per cent of the population in Asia and the Pacific who are in need of medicines do not have access to them.
- There is a wide range of accessibility to quality medicines by peoples living in different parts of the world.
- The percentage of this accessibility is definitely much lower in Asia than in the developed countries.
- It is therefore important in this respect to focus our attention on the issues of accessibility and availability.
- To a significant extent, the accessibility is also relating to the management of health service delivery, which is to ensure access to medicines by whoever in need.
- In general, access to medicine is influenced by a wide-range of factors, socio-economic and political, to the lack of knowledge on the part of people themselves.
- Strategies for ensuring access to medicines should be formulated through a multidisciplinary approach, embedded with the prevailing ethical and moral principles.
- No less importance, such a formulation must also take into priority consideration the locally specific situations and circumstances.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- The availability and accessibility of medicines depend on the demand for quantities and different varieties as well as on the procurement and distribution system.
- To fulfil the requirement for different varieties, new drugs have to be developed.

- Development of a new drug has to be undertaken through a long process of research and development, which also involves clinical trials.
- Ethical considerations in this process are of paramount importance for both researchers and manufacturers in ensuring availability and accessibility of quality drugs.
- Once the drugs are available in the market, there is a need to monitor drug reaction, and to pursue clinical studies to ensure their continued efficacy and safety.
- Clinical trials used to be conducted mainly in the industrialized world.
- During the past many years, an increasing number of these trials has been conducted in the developing countries.
- Today, a multicountry study in this area would invariably involve at least one developing country, if not more.
- There are also trials for new drugs used in prevention and control of tropical diseases.
- These, naturally, should be conducted in the developing world, where the diseases are prevailing in the poor population.
- However, recent clinical trials by a manufacturer on drugs to control Leishmaniasis, a tropical disease, have given hope of a breakthrough in the treatment of a condition that has affected millions of disadvantaged people for ages.
- Let us be optimistic that this exemplary initiative will be followed by other manufacturers for other neglected tropical diseases.

- Providing quality drugs for these diseases which are widely prevalent in developing world is a moral and ethical imperative of both researchers and manufacturers.

Colleagues,

- Clinical trials are different from other scientific experiments due to the involvement of human subjects.
- The fundamental rights of these subjects have to be adequately respected throughout the process of the trials.
- Here, the ethical committees can play a vital role as guardians of the interest of the subjects.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- The Asia Pacific region, which accounts for about a half of the world's population, presents a wide variety in socio-economic and health care settings.
- Therefore, ethical committees need to be aware of locally specific circumstances, and be adequately creative and innovative in protecting human subjects, through an acceptable standard procedures, while respecting the local context.
- Certainly, there are many more important points to be examined during the course of this meeting.
- Let me finally, wish the Conference productive deliberations and successful conclusions.

Thank you.