

***Inaugural Address***

***by***

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***at the***

***29th Session of the WHO South-East Asia  
Advisory Committee on Health Research***

***Yangon, Myanmar  
14-16 June 2004***

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Excellency Professor Dr U Kyaw Myint, Minister of Health; Excellencies; honorable guests; distinguished ACHR members; ladies and gentlemen,

- Let me first express my warmest welcome to you all to the 29<sup>th</sup> session of the WHO South-East Asia Advisory Committee on Health Research.
- I overwhelmingly thank the Government of the Union of Myanmar and the Ministry of Health for hosting this important meeting.
- I am especially grateful to His Excellency, Professor Dr U Kyaw Myint, for his keen interest in, and support to health research in the Region.
- ACHR is advisory body to the Regional Director on health research policy and strategy.
- During the three decades of its existence, the Committee has been instrumental in undertaking critical reviews and analyses of related issues.
- It has provided policy advice, and facilitated the promotion and development of health research in countries of the Region.
- Our ACHR members have also contributed significantly to the development of global health research.
- I am sure, all ACHR members are well aware of the Committee's terms of reference, which have guided its work during the past years.
- The ACHR members include the eminent scientists and public health experts in the Region who are well-versed with scientific developments; several of these members are representing medical or health research councils and analogous bodies who are well knowledgeable and experienced in the strategic issues of health research.
- Health research is an indispensable function of WHO which helps develop body of knowledge, and create evidence base for the Organization to collaborate effectively with Member States.
- We must pursue health research in a very timely and efficient manner, in responding to the current health issues and emerging health problems.
- With this in mind, I would like to see that the Committee adopts a more focused and outcome-oriented approach in its work.
- It is crucial that the advice of the ACHR is concretizable into a solid work plan for WHO/SEARO to implement in support of health research in the Member Countries.
- Urgency of present day health problems, this year, "Emerging infectious diseases" is chosen as the main theme for the ACHR session.
- I am sure it is a very timely subject for health research today.

- Infectious diseases continue to be a major challenge in the South-East Asia Region, not only in health, but also in other social aspects and economic areas.
- In this Region today, 175 million people are exposed to high risk of malaria; six million are living with HIV/AIDS; tuberculosis continues to kill 750,000 people every year; and 200,000 children succumb to measles annually.
- However, we should be satisfied that Poliomyelitis is on the verge of elimination, so is Leprosy.
- Excellent progress is being made in expanding DOTS coverage under Tuberculosis control programme. The global targets for this programme are to be achieved by 2005.
- Antiretroviral therapy for HIV/AIDS under the “3 by 5 Initiative” is being implemented in most countries of the Region, including India, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia and Nepal; together these account for 98% of our HIV burden.
- Elimination of Kala-azar, Lymphatic filariasis and Yaws is gaining momentum. Particular attention will be paid to this endeavor in the years to come.
- At the same time; Excellencies, Distinguished ACHR members; new pathogens, particularly viruses, remain unpredictable, and continue to emerge and spread across countries in a more frequent manner, without respecting national boundaries.
- During the past 30 years, more than 30 new pathogens have been detected worldwide, causing enormous health, psychological and economic impact.
- They continue to challenge and test our ability to respond quickly enough to the urgency of disease epidemics caused by these pathogens.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- During the last two years alone, the epidemic of SARS and avian influenza in Asia caused a very grave concern.
- There is no way, as yet, to say whether SARS has finally been brought under control; and whether avian influenza will make a come back.
- Since the SARS epidemic was contained last July, there have been four other outbreaks in Asia.
- Three of these were from laboratory accidents, emphasizing the need to strengthen bio-safety.
- The historically unprecedented outbreak of avian influenza in January this year affected eight Asian countries with 34 human cases and 23 deaths, not yet counting psychosocial and economic impacts on these countries.
- Sustainable vigilance through efficient global and regional surveillance and response network is really necessary.

- To address these emerging and re-emerging infections, the Regional Office has established a Task Force on Emerging Diseases, which, as a first step, will develop a vision paper – a document which contains containing a framework that will guide our action in this regard.
- The paper will emphasize particularly the Research and Development component.
- In addition to the strengthening of our capacity in outbreak alert and rapid response, we need to pay priority attention to providing valid information to the general public in the most efficient and effective manner.
- This needs a body of knowledge and evidence base generated also through our research efforts.
- The advice of the Committee shall certainly be complementary to the concepts and strategies to be enunciated in the vision paper as mentioned earlier.
- In this connection, the ACHR members are urged to kindly deliberate upon, identify and prioritize those specific areas of laboratory, epidemiological, social, environmental and public health interventions; in which research should be accelerated to strengthen our capacity to combat emerging diseases.
- These efforts will also undoubtedly contribute towards the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals set by the global community.
- These goals recognize the centrality of health for development; but their achievement will require strong health systems, including health research.
- The role of health research in this area is also pertinent in accelerating development works, especially for countries that require investment and technical assistance.

#### Excellencies,

- The increasing disease burdens make health systems development more complex.
- Funds for individual or a package of disease-specific programmes have increased substantially - from millions to billions of dollars.
- These Specific disease programmes provide an opportunity to strengthen health systems capacity in many ways.
- New knowledge is imperative to balance the overtly disease-based with the integrated and comprehensive approaches.
- This requires both effective use of existing and new knowledge, technologies and innovations, along with appropriate structures and strategies for application.
- In this process, research has a major role to play indeed.

Distinguished guests,

- In order to respond to emerging diseases effectively, health research should be promoted as an integral part of health systems development.
- Furthermore, research must be always based on ethical and equity consideration.
- It is also important to stress that funds dedicated to health research should be seen as an investment, and not as cost.
- The strong link between health outcomes and research outputs is a vital step for the sustenance and growth of national health systems.

Excellencies, Distinguished ACHR members, Ladies and Gentlemen;

- I and my staff will do our best to provide full backup to the work of the Committee, including during this session
- Once again I very much thank the Minister of Health of Myanmar for his continued support to the WHO work, and for his agreement to host this ACHR session.
- Thank members and special invitees.
- Let me place on the record also the very commendable contribution during the past many years of the institutions in Myanmar, especially the Department of Medical Research, to research and development in WHO.
- Finally I do hope that your stay in Yangon will be most enjoyable.
- And I wish the meeting all success
- Thank you