

Address

by

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*at the
Consultation to Finalize the Vision Document on
Emerging Infectious Diseases in the South-East Asia
Region*

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Address by Dr Samlee Plianbangchang, Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia Region at the Consultation to Finalize the Vision Document on Emerging Infectious Diseases in the South-East Asia Region, SEARO, New Delhi, India, 22-24 September 2004

- Distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen;
- I would like to welcome you all to this very important meeting, as the subject that we will be discussing is one of the most urgent priority issues for our region and beyond.
- With the advent of antibiotics, some experts felt that one day infectious diseases will cease to be problems of public health importance.
- However, they have been proved wrong, as the arsenal of antimicrobials has not kept pace with the genetic ingenuity of microbes.
- High prevalence and incidence of infectious diseases still pose a great challenge, especially to developing countries; including those in the South-East Asia.
- It is estimated that infectious diseases are responsible for about 40% of the 14 million annual deaths in the Region.
- Age-old foes of mankind, like tuberculosis and malaria, have not loosened their grip on our part of the world.

- Eighty per cent of our population is living in malarious areas, while tuberculosis kills more than 750,000 people every year.
- More than 6 million people are already infected by HIV in our countries.
- Outbreaks of Japanese encephalitis, leptospirosis, hepatitis E and dengue are occurring regularly, and in wider and more geographical areas.
- As if this is not enough, the challenge has become more complex due to emergence of infectious diseases.
- In the last few decades, more than 30 new microbes have been isolated.
- Some of these have played havoc due to their explosive outbreaks leading to an adverse economic impact and global panic.
- SARS and avian influenza are the most recent examples.
- Economists and market analysts are simultaneously struggling to calculate the present and the future costs related to SARS outbreak, initially estimated at US\$ 30 billion in the Far East alone.

- Microorganisms, particularly viruses, are highly unstable, and possess remarkable genetic versatility, which allows them to alter their genetic make-up.
- At the same time many pathogens develop strains, which are resistant to known antibiotics.
- To prevent and control emerging infectious diseases, or at least to reduce their health impact, concerted efforts of all concerned at all levels is really necessary.
- A strong political commitment with adequate financial and other resources are essential prerequisites.
- Epidemic preparedness and developing capacity to respond to the challenge of the outbreaks of these diseases demand additional inputs.
- The input that is necessary for strengthening public health infrastructure and services in countries.
- Strategies that need to be adopted will include the strengthening of surveillance systems; application of epidemiological, molecular, biological and behavioural approaches; and establishing linkages amongst all stakeholders.
- Public-private partnership focusing on earliest detection of emerging infectious diseases, and appropriate control measures will assure health security.

- Intercountry cooperation, exchange of information and risk communication will help prevent panic and hysteria, among other things.
- However, for preventing the international spread of these diseases, implementation of the International Health Regulations becomes obligatory.
- Research is a crucial part of the preparedness and response to new and emerging diseases.
- Appropriately applied research will help in understanding the epidemiology and pathogenesis of the diseases, as well as in developing effective measures to counter the destructive attack of these organisms.
- Ladies and gentlemen;
- I would like to stress that WHO/SEARO is fully committed to assist Member States in improving capacity in disease outbreak investigations and control.
- We also provide support, to the strengthening of disease surveillance in countries, for them to fight effectively against emerging infectious diseases.
- The purpose of drafting this “Vision” document is to alert all those concerned, of the necessity of being well prepared to face this formidable challenge.

- I earnestly invite all of us to join forces and lend our wisdom in developing a conceptual framework and strategy that can contribute effectively to the fight against emerging infections; and thus make South-East Asia Region and the world a safer place.
- Last, but equally important, is the genetic manipulation of disease agents, and the deliberate use of those agents outside the realm of health improvement.
- This is becoming another emerging threat to health of mankind today.
- Our vision document may not be complete for future use, if it does not touch on this fearsome issue.
- Once again, I wish to welcome you all to this consultation, and hope that the Vision document can be finalized with your valuable inputs and contributions.
- This document can serve as a technical guide to countries in the Region in planning appropriate programmes for combating emerging infectious diseases.
- Finally, I wish you all success in your deliberations.
- Thank you