

Opening Remarks

By
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At

***Regional Meeting on Application of Epidemiological
Principles for Public Health Action***

***WHO/SEARO
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Distinguished participants, Colleagues, Ladies and gentlemen:

With great pleasure, I welcome you all to this Regional Meeting on “Application of Epidemiological Principles for Public Health Action”. Taking into account the current global public health situation, the theme of the meeting is indeed timely, relevant and topical. The subject deserves our particular attention.

Distinguished participants,

Over the last century, remarkable improvements have been registered in quality of life and longevity. People today are, in general, healthier than they were and live longer than then they did three decades ago. Among others, positive outcomes have been achieved in combating communicable diseases during the past 30 years.

Advances in several areas in public health, including the development and use of effective antimicrobials and vaccines, have been monumental. Access to quality health care, especially by the underprivileged, has greatly improved. The application of epidemiological principles and tools in public health practice has been crucial for these successes. At the same time, we have also to recognize that the overall socio-economic development has immensely contributed to these achievements. These successes and achievements serve as a source of our “inspiration” and “optimism” to constructively pursue further our efforts in the quest for better health.

Distinguished participants,

Despite the progress recorded till date, the threat from, and hence, the fight against, diseases, is far from over. In fact, we are facing “new health challenges” every day. Previously unknown pathogens keep emerging. Old scourges that were once subdued, in decline, or quiescent, have re-emerged.

Today, “infectious diseases” remain a “growing threat” to “global health security”; and to socio-economic progress. Indeed, the microbial world remains dynamic and unpredictable. This phenomenon is more prevalent today.

With the rapid changes in lifestyles, and rapidly aging populations, epidemiological transition has taken place in a big way. Chronic noncommunicable diseases are fast emerging as problems of public health importance all over the world. Besides, we have the continuing problem of high maternal and child mortality, which needs to be urgently addressed if we are to achieve the specific health MDGs on the target date. Through an epidemiological approach, evidence on distribution, as well as on risks and determinants of these health problems, can be generated for health policy and strategy formulation. The evidence is helpful for the purpose of education and advocacy for health; as well as for health programme development and management.

The application of epidemiological principles is equally important in the prevention and control of both communicable and noncommunicable diseases.

Distinguished participants,

The current global concerns with “climate change” and “economic down turn” add to the challenges that we face in improving health care and in securing global health. The impact of these occurrences can slow down the momentum; or even reverse some of the public health gains made thus far.

Furthermore, to effectively prevent and mitigate health impacts from “disasters”, there is need to strengthen preparedness, surveillance and response; which have to be developed on the epidemiological basis. The application of an epidemiological approach in an “emergency situation”, by collecting and using data for action at local level, can effectively prevent disease outbreaks.

In addition, effective implementation of “the revised IHR”, which is intended to ensure global health security, needs epidemiological backup at all levels of intervention.

In order to ensure more efficient and more effective public health interventions, we need to capitalize on our past experiences in the application of epidemiological approaches in responding to public health problems.

We have to be better equipped ourselves with epidemiological tools to meet the current public health challenges; and to prepare for future health threats. We need to prepare ourselves adequately for combating emerging threats to public health, such as climate change.

In view of these “mounting challenges”, it is necessary, among other things, to strengthen and maximize the application of epidemiological principles in health programme development and management.

Competence to identify public health problems, to analyse and interpret data, as well as design and implement evidence-based interventions is essential for today's public health action. Skills in investigating and initiating timely response to disease outbreaks, and to other public health emergencies are indispensable indeed, in mitigating the impact and preventing consequences. While expanding the public health workforce for tackling public health problems, we need to strive towards building a critical mass of epidemiologists at various levels of health systems.

The South-East Asia Region has many years of accumulated experience in developing and implementing public health programmes. There are many institutions in the Region excelling in the application of epidemiological principles in public health practice. These institutions should be maximally utilized in the area of epidemiology and public health.

The World Health Organization accords high importance to the networking of public health and epidemiology institutions in the Region. By bringing them to common platforms, and by networking them, WHO promotes coordination and cooperation among these institutions, in sharing the relevant experiences and expertise. The networks of these institutions can effectively contribute to the improvement of quality of work and fostering partnerships in epidemiology and public health. Networking builds trust and collaboration; as well as promotes shared values to advance the noble cause of public health.

We need to seize every opportunity to foster intercountry and inter-institutional cooperation in promoting capacity building in epidemiology; and in promoting the use of epidemiological approaches in public health and health-related action. Such cooperation, with an “enabling policy environment”, is essential for the development of a critical mass of competent epidemiologists. WHO looks forward to working closely with countries and interested partners in strengthening epidemiological capacity in SEAR. We certainly look forward to the effective application of epidemiological know-how and skills to overcome public health challenges in the 21st century.

Distinguished participants, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen:

Before concluding, let me provide some food for thought, as far as epidemiology is concerned. This is from my long experience in public health. Today, epidemiology must be viewed in a much broader context. Epidemiology should not deal with only physical ailments. But, also with all aspects of social illness. Epidemiology should be viewed within the context of the ecological system. The system that deals with the interaction between man and his environment. The environment that is not only physical, but also psychosocial, cultural, economic and political. We have heard of many other areas that need the application of epidemiological principles: Epidemiology of mental illness; Epidemiology of malnutrition; Epidemiology of accidents and injuries; Epidemiology of occupational diseases; and so on.

Equally important and one must recognize that, “economic principles” will not be effectively applied to health, without adequate support from “epidemiological principles”. At the individual level, epidemiology helps increase our own “analytical” capability and capacity; epidemiology helps make us a “good researcher”, a “good planner” and a “good manager” in health. Epidemiology is an indispensable tool for every “public health professional” and “public health practitioner”.

Today, the concept of health is very broad indeed. Epidemiology, which is the main thrust of health action, the main thrust of public health action, must encompass all aspects of today's health concerns. It depends on us on how to use this tool, “epidemiology tool”, in our public health career in our public health work. Epidemiology requires the recognition and appreciation it deserves for its role in the health field. With this recognition and appreciation, it will take us a long way towards the application of epidemiological principles for public health action.

Finally, let me reiterate that “public health interventions” will not be effectively developed or implemented without appropriate application of epidemiological principles.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me conclude by wishing you all “all the best” and “all success” in your deliberations. And I wish all of you an enjoyable stay in Delhi.

Thank you.