

Opening Remarks

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At

Regional Consultation on Self Care in the Context of PHC

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Honourable Permanent Secretary for Public Health, Dr Prat Boonyawongvirot, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

It is indeed with great pleasure that I welcome you all to the Regional Consultation on Self Care in the Context of Primary Health Care (PHC). This is one in a series of follow-up actions of our Regional Conference on Revitalizing Primary Health Care held in Jakarta last August. That conference was organized to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Alma-Ata Declaration on Primary Health Care.

As we all know, PHC is the key to the attainment of the social goal of Health for All. It has been realized in this context that Health for All will not be attained without contribution by people of all walks of life. Very important in this context is the contribution at individual, family and community levels. This is what we call "Health for All" through "All for Health".

This Regional Consultation is an attempt to highlight the importance of the contribution by individuals to health care. This is in particular to emphasize one key aspect of contribution made by individuals. That is "self care" which is practiced by individual persons.

Good self care or effective self care depends on knowledge and understanding of the individuals. And, very importantly, it depends on the ability of individuals to be in control of their own selves.

Effective self care by the individuals can certainly lead to good health in the family and in the community. And self care in a wide scale can ultimately lead to better health of the country's entire population. For this amplifying effect of self care to take place, a country-wide system is required for supporting the development of its promotion at various stages. And the promotion of self care should be carried out within the context of the country's PHC scheme.

Self care should be viewed as an important intervention in PHC. PHC as we know, is an integral part of a country's health systems. Self care, if systematically promoted, can contribute significantly to equity in health status of the population.

Promotion of self care needs policy direction and professional support. And promotion of self care is best pursued within the social and cultural contexts of the community.

Good self care depends on individuals having access to the right information. The information that can enable people to make informed decisions on the care of their own health. The right information is a key word in promotion of self care.

Promotion of self care is an educational and empowering process. The process that ensures that people with the right information can make the right decision as far as their own health is concerned. Skills in education and communication are indispensable indeed for effective promotion of self care. Access to information, the quality of information, the ability to interpret and apply information are important to a self care promotion process.

Self care in a broad sense should be considered as an integral component of the continuum that runs through all levels of health care. Self care in a broad sense goes far beyond self medication. Self care is a matter for individuals to do things for themselves in order to stay healthy, without or with medicines. Self care has to be seen as an integral part of promotive, preventive, curative and rehabilitative care.

One key issue for health professionals in this connection is to help people have free access to health information. The health staff has to play a key role in helping people to be able to choose the right information for their correct understanding, judgement and decision on their own health.

With professional back-up, community health workers and community health volunteers need to play this supporting role actively at community and grassroots levels. These workers and volunteers should also act as change agents to help effect necessary change in the way people practise self care. This is to help ensure that people at those levels are doing the right things for their own health.

In such a process, health information may need demystification to make it easily understood by all people, especially those at the ground level. As far as information is concerned, there is another side of the coin that needs to be mentioned.

Health is considered to be an industry. The industry within which health related goods and services are being marketed. People also receive information through commercial channels of this market. More often than not, in such a situation, people have difficulty in differentiating between the right and not the right information. People, in general, tend to believe in what they see and what they hear through the media. The media that conveys information to them at home, at the workplace, and everywhere they go.

With advancement in information and communication technology, health messages to people have become increasingly complex. This complexity is in both the content and the process. It is the duty of health professionals therefore to help people to be able to choose and select the right information in that situation.

We may have to accept, in this connection, that not all available information is the right information for effective self care.

And, on the other hand, advancement in ICT, if properly harnessed, can also greatly contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of self care promotion.

Furthermore, information for self care may come from peers, friends and relatives. This type of information is influential for individuals in their decision-making. Therefore, when educating the individuals on self care, we need also to think of their peers, friends and relatives. The process for today's information flow to individuals and families needs to be well understood by health professionals in their efforts to promote self care. Self care, if properly promoted, can contribute significantly to a longer life. The life that has increased social and economic productivity, and the life that has more mental and social well-being.

Self care can have a positive impact on the economy, at least, at the individual and family levels. There is anecdotal evidence that self care has led to reduction in health expenditure. Self care, if well managed in a large scale, can substantially contribute to poverty alleviation, especially in the poor communities. Self care, if correctly practised, can contribute greatly to the rational use of medicines and/or to the less use of medicines. It should be underlined that the use of medicines in self care is really an important subject. This aspect of self care was also touched upon during our Regional Meeting on the Role of Education in Rational Use of Medicines held in Bangkok last year.

Furthermore, “Social control of health technology” can greatly facilitate the development of effective self care practice. The technology in this context is the technology which is technically and operationally appropriate for the use by people in the community. And it is the technology, which is socially and culturally acceptable by individuals, the family and the community. For all this to happen, people must be in control of the technology which is made available for their use.

It should also be underlined that promotion of self care needs multidisciplinary and multisectoral efforts. On a large scale, health staff alone will be not enough to achieve the objective of self care promotion.

The role of the education sector in promotion of self care is important indeed; this is especially when people of the entire community and the entire country are targeted. Promotion of self care needs understanding and support from all levels of the health care systems from the primary to the tertiary.

If the promotion of self care is to be pursued on a national scale, government policy and commitment are the prerequisites. This is particularly so when self care is seen as an integral part of PHC, which is practised nation-wide.

Self care is actually not new, however, its active promotion on a large scale is yet to be systematically planned and implemented. Self care seems to be simple, but the process of its promotion is complex and perplexed. Self care may sometime seem to be a common sense, but it needs a lot of professional thinking and insight.

First and foremost, understanding and appreciation by health professionals are the important starting points for effective self care promotion. In this process, we need to gain more of such professional understanding and appreciation. And we have to understand that the right practice of self care will not be in competition with the care provided by health professionals. Instead, self care will undoubtedly complement in a big way the care provided by health professionals. Professional care, or care provided by health professionals, should be considered the most important contribution to the promotion of effective self care. And self care should be considered and used as an important means for health promotion and disease prevention.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Various aspects of research are needed to generate the evidence necessary for self care promotion.

These aspects are :

- Identification of the socio-cultural determinants which influence self care practice;
- The use of information and communication technology in educating and empowering people to practise effective self-care;
- Collection and compilation of success stories of self care in the family and community for further promotion; and
- Several aspects of what I have said are researchable subjects, which may be interesting to researchers and health care practitioners to pursue.

Very importantly, we have to do research to assess and evaluate the efficacy, benefit and safety of every self care practice. And we have to pursue research to assess the contribution from self care practice to health improvement of the population in the community.

We still need a lot of experiences, lessons and evidence to learn and accumulate in our pursuit of a wide scale, health care promotion.

This consultation will start with the very basic question, "What is self care?" The Secretariat will present a broad connotation of self care for consideration of the distinguished participants.

Some aspects of self care will be brought up for deliberations during the consultation. And the consultation will end with strategies, best practices and main activities for promoting self care in the context of PHC.

We call this meeting a consultation. However, it is more of a seminar. I hope, however, that the distinguished participants would find this meeting interesting and useful to their work. The work that can lead to better health for all people through the promotion of self care within the PHC context.

The WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia will do its best in supporting Member States in their efforts to promote effective self care practice in their countries.

Finally, ladies and gentlemen, I wish the meeting all the best and all success.

Thank you.