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*By*

*Dr Samlee Plianbangchang  
Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia*

*At*

*Visit to National Institute of Communicable Disease (NICD)*

*NICD, Delhi, India  
25 April 2006*

## **Visit to National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD)**

**2 5 April 2006**

***NICD, Delhi, India***

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**DR SAMLEE PLIANBANGCHANG  
REGIONAL DIRECTOR, WHO SOUTH-EAST ASIA**

Dr Shiv Lal; Dr Pattanayak; Dr K B Sharma; Dr J P Gupta; Faculty; Students; Colleagues; Ladies and gentlemen:

First of all, I would like to thank the National Institute of Communicable Diseases for giving me the opportunity to visit its facilities once again. I am pleased to meet the Faculty Members and Students of the Master of Public Health Programme.

This educational programme will take us a long way in the development of public health expertise for disease prevention and control. Due to unavoidable commitment elsewhere, I missed the opportunity to attend the launching of the programme on 29 March 2006. Therefore, I was keen to come today. The NICD must be overwhelmingly congratulated for this important initiative. The initiative that will contribute greatly to the prevention and control of communicable diseases in India and other countries in the South-East Asia Region.

Communicable diseases continue to pose public health problems of high priority in this part of the world. We are faced with: new diseases, like HIV/AIDS, SARS and avian influenza; emerging diseases, like dengue and leptospirosis; and re-emerging diseases, like malaria and tuberculosis. These are in addition to other endemic infections of public health importance, such as meningitis, encephalitis, hepatitis and many more. Each year, our people also suffer from several ill-health syndromes of unknown cause. During the past three decades, however, more than 30 new pathogens have been identified.

Combating communicable diseases has always been our challenge and this challenge will continue in the foreseeable future. During the 1990s, the communicable disease situation seemed to be getting worse in our Region. Severe outbreaks of several infectious conditions became more frequent. At the end of the decade, WHO's Regional Office for South-East Asia critically analysed those situations. We came to the conclusion that the deterioration of public health infrastructure had significantly contributed to such worsening phenomenon. We also concluded that, in such situations, strengthening public health workforce through appropriate education and training was urgently needed. Therefore, at the end of 1999, a Regional Conference on Public Health Education and Practice in South-East Asia Region in the 21st Century was organized in Calcutta. The Calcutta Declaration was developed as an output of the Conference. This Declaration has been used by WHO as the basis for supporting the strengthening of public health workforce in the Region, with emphasis on education and training.

Public Health Initiative, which is a strategy of high priority in WHO's work in the South-East Asia Region, aims to accelerate the pace of such strengthening. I am very delighted to learn in this connection that the Master of Public Health Programme here is devoted to Field Epidemiology. This effort will contribute to the strengthening of public health workforce in the area of disease prevention and control. The Field Epidemiology Training Programme was started in WHO's South-East Asia Region 26 years ago in a number of countries. This training programme has been a success story in Thailand. Unfortunately, in other countries, the programme did not thrive as expected. However, with the advent of emerging infectious diseases, like SARS and avian influenza, WHO is now trying to help revitalize the programme in several countries. Certainly, India is one of them, where WHO would like to see that the Field Epidemiology Training Programme is revived and is made fully operational. And here we are, at NICD, where both the short and long courses have been developed, and are being run for the health staff from other countries in the Region. This epidemiology course at NICD, I am sure, will greatly strengthen the professional status of Field Epidemiology.

Colleagues, epidemiology is the backbone of any public health work, including disease prevention and control. I am confident that all of us are aware that, to be effective, Field Epidemiology must be founded on the classic principle of epidemiology. The principle that is built on the recognition of the importance of interaction between the host agent, on the one hand, and environment on the other. Both the host and the agent have their own genetic endowments which influence their adaptation to the changing environment. Environment here is not only defined in the physical term; but also in social, cultural, economic and political terms. The successful application of scientific breakthroughs in disease prevention and control has to take into account various environmental factors. Also, successful interventions in disease prevention and control are usually the outcome of sound programme development and management. Programme development and management should, therefore, be an important part of any public health professional course, such as this one. This MPH programme is an excellent beginning for education of public health professionals. When we move along, and gain experience from running the course, there will be opportunity to make the programme more and more perfect.

Furthermore, colleagues, in many instances, multisectoral cooperation is necessary for disease prevention and control. Therefore, the opportunity for public health education, such as being provided by this course, should also be open to people from other sectors than health, such as agriculture and animal husbandry. WHO will be very happy to provide the required technical support in implementing and further improving the programme. The WHO sub-unit for Communicable Disease Surveillance and Response, located here at NICD, will ensure our full technical back-up to the course.

On this occasion, I would also like to wish the faculty staff members and students of the programme all the best in their pursuit to reduce the burden of communicable diseases in the South-East Asia Region. I look forward to the best contribution of the programme towards better health of our people, through prevention and control of diseases.

With these few words, I wish the Master of Public Health Degree Programme on Field Epidemiology of NICD all success. Thank you.