Speech by WHO Representative to Bangladesh

National Workshop On Development of National Strategy for Birth Defect Prevention and Surveillance in Bangladesh
Hotel Ruposhi Bangla: 25-26 October, 2013

— Respected Chair Person, Dr. Syed Abu Zafar Md Musa, Director Primary Health Care and Line Director MNC&AH
— Honorable Chief Guest, Mr. M.M. Neazuddin, Honorable Secretary, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
— Honorable Special Guests
— Distinguished Health Professionals, CDC WHO
— Media Representatives

Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning

First of all I would like to congratulate colleagues of Government of Bangladesh, Centre for Disease Control, Atlanta, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, ICDDR,B and WHO-SEARO for organizing such an important workshop to promote the issues of Birth Defect Prevention and Surveillance in Bangladesh.

Birth defects and preterm births are leading causes of childhood death, chronic illness, and disability in many countries, including developing countries. In an effort to address the emerging importance of birth defects, the WHO Assembly on May 21, 2010 adopted a resolution* calling all Member States to promote primary prevention and care for the children with birth defects by:

- Developing and strengthening registration and surveillance systems;
- Developing expertise and building capacity;
- Strengthening research and studies on etiology, diagnosis and prevention; and
- Promoting international cooperation.

Consequently WHO South East Asia Regional Office and Member states have collectively developed a strategic framework for birth defect prevention and control and a Situation analysis report on Birth Defects in SEAR has been published.

According to our report, prevalence of birth defect in the South East Asia region ranges between 54.1 to 64.3 per 1000 live births, however this is a very crude estimate, as the quality of data regarding this issue from this region is not
satisfactory. In Bangladesh, the estimated prevalence of birth defects is 58.6 per thousand live births; which is again a very crude estimate.

Bangladesh is on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goals for maternal and child survival (MDGs 4 & 5). However, we know that the decline in newborn deaths has been lagging behind. Despite a decline from 52 to 32 deaths per 1,000 live births between 1994 and 2010, contribution of newborn deaths in total under 5 deaths has increased from 39% in 1989-93 to 60% in 2011. After sepsis (23%), asphyxia (21%) and prematurity/LBW (11%), birth defect contributes the most in newborn death. However, exact number of newborn deaths attributable to birth defect is yet unknown and needs to be estimated in order to be able to address the causes of BD and design interventions accordingly. Some of the known risk factors of birth defect (consanguinity, poverty, infection during pregnancy, malaria, etc) are highly prevalent in Bangladesh. No known hospital or community based surveillance or surveys are looking at these issues. This further demands for greater focus on sensitizing policy makers in prioritizing this issue at national level and planning for surveillance and prevention programmes for birth defects.

There are existing programme which can be used for prevention of Birth Defects like: RMNCH, Adolescent health programme, Micronutrient supplementation programmes: Iodine, Congenital Syphilis elimination activities, Immunization programmes: Rubella, NCD programmes: Diabetes, obesity, tobacco prevention, Health education and health promotion.

I hope this national workshop will help the stakeholders, professional bodies and high-level policy makers, to come together at the same platform and establish birth defect prevention and surveillance as an area of focus and to contribute to develop a strategic action plan to address the issue of Birth Defects in Bangladesh.

I wish every success of this workshop and thank Bangladesh Government for taking up the timely initiative. Let me thank colleagues from CDC, Atlanta and professionals from different institution for coming forward to contribute to this important workshop.

We, WHO feel really honored to be a part of this event.

Thank you all.