Message from the WHO Representative to India

World Health Day 2012

Thanks to the progress achieved in many domains during the past decades, most of today’s Indians will live longer than their parents and grand parents. India’s population will continue to age steadily and significantly in the foreseeable future. It is estimated that population aged 60 years and above will grow from 77 million (7.4% of the total population) in 2001 to 300 million (17%) by 2050. The ageing of its population is undoubtedly one of the major social transformations that India will experience in the years and decades to come. This is both a complex challenge and a great opportunity.

The challenge for India, as for all countries over the world, is not just to add further years to life but to add “life to years”. To enable the elderly to live full, enriching and productive lives, they need to remain connected to the world around them, staying amongst and in harmony with their beloved ones and others of all ages in their communities.

The ageing of the population is not just a challenge, and should not be seen as a burden for the Indian society. It is also a great opportunity for all - at all levels and domains - to benefit from the experience, knowledge and wisdom that age brings, to help make the life of the millions of children, young and adults, just and simply better.

For this ideal to become a reality, one main proviso: that the elderly remain as long as possible in the best of physical, mental and spiritual health. It is to move towards this goal that, on this World Health Day 2012, the World Health Organization (WHO) calls for action on its declaration that “good health adds life to years”.

For sure, there will be a need to further improve the access of the elderly population to preventive, promotive, curative and rehabilitative services. The launch by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare of its National Programme for Health Care of the Elderly, constitutes an important and significant step in that direction. The programme is now being rolled out in 100 districts across India and plans are being developed to scale it up to cover the entire nation.
The factors that positively affect the ageing process and the health of the elderly include health in the earlier stages of life, healthy living habits and working conditions. Simple measures at all ages of life, such as a balanced diet and refraining from using tobacco products, alcohol and other substances, combined with regular physical activity can make a major difference. While addressing these factors and determinants requires the voluntary and active participation of individuals, the feasibility of healthy decisions and choices also supposes a continued attention of all parts of the society to the social determinants of health, and a strong commitment to address them.

Facilitating a healthier elderly population to support their families and communities, use their knowledge and experience to inspire and bring love to others of all ages necessitates comprehensive policies and action by many sectors beyond health.

The World Health Day 2012 calls for a greater attention, not only to the ageing of the population in India and across the globe, but also to policies and actions that ensure “good health adds life to years”. WHO shall continue to provide technical support to all stakeholders willing to research and act on the many factors that influence the ageing process and the health of the elderly and play a pivotal role to support coordinated actions of all stakeholders.

The WHO Country Office for India is scaling up the campaign in the country, partnering with the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and many stakeholders and organizing Ageing and Health related activities at the local, state and national level to sensitize policy makers, members of the medical and health fraternity, the media and the whole community. It has prepared materials that can be used by all its partners.

Let us join hands to promote a society in which the elderly are respected and treasured, stay connected to their families and communities and live full and productive lives!

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WHO Representative to India

Good health adds life to years