The Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) is considered a high priority for the new Government of Myanmar and for the Ministry of Health and Sports, in particular during the first 100 days and six months of their administration. On 29th April 2016 Dr Myint Htwe, Union Minister of Health and Sports, launched the National Immunization Week with a high-level ceremony held in Nay Pyi Taw. The launch of the Myanmar Immunization Week happened in correlation with WHO’s World Immunization Week and represented an important policy statement of the new Government of Myanmar.

In his speech the Minister emphasized the efforts taken to reach every child in Myanmar with vaccines through immunization campaigns and routine immunization activities. He also illustrated plans to expand vaccinations services in hospitals, hard to reach and peri-urban areas and increase involvement of communities through social mobilization activities.

The ceremony on 29 April also signaled the definite switch from trivalent Oral Polio Vaccine (tOPV) to bivalent OPV (bOPV) in Myanmar. From now on, tOPV will not be used anymore for immunization throughout the country. The switch has been enacted as part of the Global Polio EndGame Strategy, which recommended all countries to complete the elimination of tOPV vaccines and reinforce anti-polio immunization services through the introduction of Inactivated Polio Vaccine (IPV) in addition to bOPV in routine immunization activities.

Talking about the introduction of new vaccines, Dr Myint Htwe highlighted the efforts taken in past months to introduce Haemophilus Influenza B (Hib), Hepatitis B, Rubella and IPV vaccines in routine immunization activities and also illustrated the plans for the introduction of Pneumococcal vaccine (PCV) in Myanmar from July 2016. In the near future Myanmar will also introduce Japanese Encephalitis, Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) and rotavirus into routine immunization services.

Advocacy efforts towards parliamentarians and Chief State and Region Ministers will be central to obtain support for strengthening immunization activities as well as community mobilization, integrated immunization services in hospitals, data management, effective monitoring and supervision and the implementation of special strategies for hard to reach, conflict-affected and peri-urban areas.
Training and capacity building to non-governmental partners: WHO Tuberculosis team visits CESVI projects in Pyin Oo Lwin

Providing training to partners delivering services in the field is an important opportunity to strengthen the capacities of health workers who are the primary respondents to complex health issues. For this reason, a joint WHO and National Tuberculosis Program mission visited the projects of the Italian NGO CESVI in Pyin Oo Lwin and neighbouring areas in June 2016, to provide technical advice and updates on Tuberculosis care at primary health facility level.

Training on the epidemiology of Tuberculosis and infection control measures was delivered to around 25 doctors and nurses working in the surrounding townships. The health workers were encouraged to share their first-hand experiences and highlight problematic issues. During the training health workers also received updates on new guidelines in TB care, as well as on the issues regarding TB-HIV co-infection. Problems surrounding the stigma of TB-HIV patients and the provision of appropriate counseling were addressed by the trainers and through group discussions and exercises amongst the participants.

The WHO team also had the opportunity to conduct field trips in villages of Nawngkio Township and attend a community mobile team visit. About 20 villagers attended the health provision session at the house of the local health worker, in collaboration with two of CESVI’s doctors. The session started with a Health Education talk about recognizing early signs and symptoms of TB delivered by the health worker, and was then followed by medical examinations of patients from the doctors – who also provided medicines free of charge. The team then went on to perform contact investigation activities at the house of a former TB patient in the village, providing advice on the early identification of TB symptoms and on the need to seek out medical advice.

From top to bottom: the WHO team and Cesvi doctor provide medicines to a patient during the mobile health session; the Health Education session is conducted during the visit. Credit: WHO/TB
Blood donations from citizens throughout Myanmar mark World Blood Donor Day 2016

On June 14th 2016 the Yangon National Blood Centre opened its doors to welcome hundreds of Yangon residents wishing to donate their life-saving blood. A special ceremony was organized to thank all new and recurrent blood donors under the theme ‘Blood Connects Us All’, and the public was invited to donate in blood banks around the country.

The importance of giving blood cannot be underestimated: according to WHO regional figures, in South East Asia there are around 2 million units of blood missing each year out of the 18 million units required. WHO calls on all countries to achieve 100% voluntary, unpaid donations by 2020 to satisfy national blood requirements and ensuring that this life-saving resource can be readily available at all levels of the health system.

Ceremonies to mark the day were organized in all areas of Myanmar. The health officials’ call to donate was very well received. During the day, thousands of people flocked to the National Blood Centre in Yangon and other blood banks around the country to give blood. They were welcomed by the volunteers and midwives attending to the donors; in Yangon, donors at the National Blood Centre were offered lunch boxes and even free taxi rides home by young business-owners of a car importing company, who chose to thank the public in this way for their precious donation.

A Buddhist monk donates blood at the Yangon National Blood Centre. Credit: WHO/ F. Maurizio

WHO supports the School Health Team of the MoHS to scale up prevention activities and health interventions in schools

The School Health team of the Ministry of Health and Sports presented an assessment of the situation for school health in Myanmar at a meeting attended by the Deputy Director General of Public Health Department, Dr. Yin Thandar Lwin, officials of the Ministry of Health and Sports and by the Medical Officer responsible for School Health of WHO Myanmar.

Despite the difficulties faced by the School Health team (limited funding available and an initial presence of only 80 school health teams across the country’s 330 townships – now scaled up to full 330 teams), very positive results have been achieved in recent years: for instance, the dramatic success at national level of deworming campaigns for school children, with a drastic decrease in prevalence of soil-transmitted helminthiasis from 70% in 2002 to 21% in 2012.

However, many challenges remain to be addressed. The prevalence of anaemia amongst school children, for example, still stands at a high 36%, according to the 2012 school health survey.

The WHO Medical Officer discussed with MoHS counterparts the priority issues for scaling up school health activities in Myanmar and analysed in detail the possible strategies to be applied. School Health numbers as one of the top priorities of the new Government of Myanmar. The policies and strategies will be jointly discussed and endorsed by the Ministry of Health and Sports and the Ministry of Education in a day multisectoral workshop to develop the School Health National Plan for 2017-2022, likely to be held in December 2016 with WHO support.
World No Tobacco Day: Get ready for Plain Packaging

May 31st marks the international celebration for World No Tobacco Day, a time when Governments and Ministries of Health worldwide show their commitment to promote tobacco-curbing policies in line with the recommendations of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC).

This year’s celebrations of World No Tobacco Day in Myanmar saw the announcements by the Ministry of Health and Sports of the new measures aimed at reducing the numbers of smokers and tobacco users in the country. Dr Myint Htwe, Union Minister of Health and Sports, illustrated the policies during the ceremony held in Nay Pyi Taw: from the inclusion of graphic warnings on manufactured tobacco packages from September 2016 – which will also act as a deterrent for non-users to avoid take up smoking - to the measures aimed at reducing betel quid consumption across the country.

In May 2016 the Union Government Office released a statement pushing for the ban on the use of betel quid around schools, government offices and health facilities. Betel quid usage is widespread in Myanmar, with serious health consequences ranging from tooth decay to dramatic increases in the likelihood of developing oral and mouth cancers. Addressing the consumption of smokeless tobacco products is a policy recommendation of the FCTC, to which Myanmar became a signatory in 2003.

WHO opens new Sub-Office in Nay Pyi Taw

On 7th June 2016 WHO officially inaugurated the new WHO Sub-Office in Park Royal Hotel, Nay Pyi Taw. The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Health and Sports, Professor Thet Khaing Win officiated the opening with WHO Representative, Dr Luna. The small ceremony was also attended by other Ministry of Health and Sports officials, including the Director General of the Department of Medical Research Dr. Kyaw Zin Thant, the Director General of the Department of Traditional Medicine, Dr. Yi Yi Myint and Deputy Director of International Relations Division of the Ministry of Health, Dr. Ye Min Htwe.

With the opening of this office in the capital WHO Myanmar wishes to further strengthen the fruitful collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Sports and provide an additional space for working more closely on joint activities and projects in the future.