Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh appointed as Regional Director WHO South-East Asia, for a second term

WHO’s Executive Board confirmed, on 26 January 2019, the re-appointment of Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh for a second five year term as Regional Director of the South East Asia Region. In September 2018, the Member States of the South East Asia Region had unanimously re-nominated Dr Khetrapal Singh as Regional Director.

Congratulating her, WHO Director-General, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said, “as the first woman to become Regional Director of WHO South-East Asia Region, you provided dynamic leadership in a Region that accounts for a quarter of the world’s population but a disproportionate burden of diseases. Under your leadership, the Region has made remarkable progress.”

Dr Poonam Khetrapal Singh said in her acceptance speech “it is a privilege to once again be appointed as Regional Director of WHO South-East Asia Region. The confidence you have reposed in me is humbling.”

Outlining her vision for the second term commencing 1 February 2019, Dr Khetrapal Singh explained “we must sustain the gains we made... and accelerate progress and innovation, to advance health and well being across the Region.”

Trachoma: a disease targeted for elimination in Myanmar by 2020

Trachoma is a bacterial disease of the eye. It is transmitted from one person to another through contact with eye or nose discharge from an infected person. It is a public health problem in 37 countries of the world, including Myanmar. Trachoma is responsible for blindness or visual impairment in 1.9 million people globally --- with many more at risk. To eliminate trachoma, which is feasible, WHO is promoting a strategy called ‘SAFE’, with S standing for Surgery for advanced disease, A for Antibiotics to clear infection, F for Facial cleanliness and E for Environmental improvement.

In Myanmar, trachoma is found in 14 townships of 3 regions (Sagaing, Mandalay, Magway). The infection among school going children was 0.2% in 2015-16. The country is targeting trachoma elimination by 2020, aligned with regional priorities. During January-April 2019, the national trachoma control programme and partners are preparing the blueprint for elimination. A survey, with follow up actions, is scheduled to take place in the affected areas of Myanmar during 2019.

Resources have been mobilized to help the country achieve elimination and certification.
TB-HIV co-infection

To address the burden of TB-HIV, the national AIDS and Tuberculosis programmes in the Ministry of Health & Sports are responding jointly to TB and HIV diseases, with the support of partners. Myanmar has made impressive progress in addressing both diseases. At the same time, despite progress, Myanmar is still considered ‘high burden’ for TB and HIV and has a high rate of TB-HIV co-infections.

According to the Global TB Report 2018, approximately 5,000 of 32,000 TB deaths in Myanmar (during 2017) were infected with TB and HIV. Consequently, collaboration between the national AIDS and TB programmes at all levels is key.

We need to increase case detection of TB in HIV-infected persons — and of HIV in TB patients. This will help improve patient care and help optimize use of resources. For example, preventive therapy with *isoniazid* is encouraged for all eligible HIV positive patients. Furthermore, TB drug susceptibility testing should be done in appropriate cases. Importantly, good infection control must be practised at all times.

Schistosomiasis: a preventable public health problem

*Schistosomiasis* is a parasitic disease caused by *blood flukes* (worms), affecting the urinary and digestive tracts. The disease has been reported from 78 countries in the world. People become infected when larval forms of the parasite are released from freshwater snails and penetrate human skin. Transmission from human to human is not possible. Recently, schistosomiasis is reported in Myanmar, viz Rakhine State, Southern Shan State (near Lake Inle) and Bago Region. Between Oct 2016 and Nov 2018, about 1,734 suspected cases were tested, and 947 were found serologically (IgG) positive.

To support prevention and control efforts by the national health authorities, WHO provided technical guidelines, partook in field investigation and mobilized essential commodities for diagnosis and treatment. A mission of experts from WHO and Ministry of Health & Sports, visited parts of Rakhine State, and assessed the situation to advise on future course of action. Confirmatory diagnostic tests are needed. Further, the specific species of snail responsible for transmission (as intermediate host) needs to identified and mapped. In addition, it is recommended to map where *schistosomiasis* occurs in the country, as per WHO standard protocols.

Prevention and control of *schistosomiasis* is based on access to safe water, improved sanitation, hygiene education and health literacy and snail control. Furthermore, based on where the disease occurs and how widespread it is, large-scale treatment of at-risk population may be considered. Further details can be obtained at [https://www.who.int/schistosomiasis/en/](https://www.who.int/schistosomiasis/en/) and [https://bit.ly/2Oc6YR2](https://bit.ly/2Oc6YR2)

Animal--human interface for health

Humans coexist with animals in a variety of ways -- in close interdependence based on companion, production, food, livelihood or well-being with the environment together. The interface between humans, animals and the environment we share can be a source of diseases impacting public health. Diseases transmissible from animals to humans are referred to as *zoonoses* -- through direct or indirect contact (by way of food, water and the environment).

Several examples of disease which are transmitted from animals to humans can be given. *Rabies*, for instance, can infect domestic dogs as well as wild animals (eg bats, foxes). It is transmitted to humans through the saliva of infected animals. The *Ebola virus*, for instance, is transmitted to humans from wild animals which can spread further by human-human transmission. *Avian influenza*, for example, is transmitted directly through contact with sick or dead birds, or indirectly through contaminated products.

A significant share of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic in nature -- impacting health, food chain and economic development. Therefore, cross-sectoral collaboration is key to understand and manage the possible risks zoonoses pose. Considering their potential impact, it is a matter of global health security.

Further details are available at:
Voluntary unpaid blood donation

Blood transfusion is an essential health service to save lives. Every health system needs it. Adequate and safe blood supply can only be ensured by voluntary, unpaid blood donations. It is among this group that the risk of blood borne infections is lowest. In 2017, Myanmar sourced approx 80% of blood donations from voluntary, unpaid donors.

Hence a decision to donate your blood can save a life, or even several lives -- if the blood is separated into components and prepared for further use. Blood is a most precious gift anyone can give to another person.

WHO Myanmar produced special factsheet on voluntary blood donation in February 2019 -- it is available at https://bit.ly/2DAdzjl

Ways to reduce your cancer risk

Different types of cancer, together, are the second leading cause of deaths globally -- and responsible for an estimated 9.6 million deaths in 2018. World wide, about 1 in 6 deaths are due to cancer. Approx 70% of deaths from cancer occur in low- and middle-income countries.

For prevention, here are some simple ways to reduce risk of cancer:

- **do not smoke** or use any form of tobacco or betel nut
- make your home and workplace smoke-free
- enjoy a healthy diet - fresh fruits & vegetables
- breastfeeding reduces the mother’s cancer risk - and is great for the baby!
- **vaccinate** your children against viral hepatitis B and human papillomavirus (HPV)
- avoid too much sun, use sun protection
- reduce indoor and outdoor air pollution
- be physically active
- limit alcohol intake
- take part in organized cancer screening programmes

World TB Day
24 March 2019

Each year, we mark World TB Day on March 24. It commemorates the date in 1882 when scientist Dr Robert Koch announced discovery of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, the bacillus that causes tuberculosis (TB).

The theme of World TB Day 2019 is “It’s TIME”. National TB programme and partners consider “It’s time to end TB through multi-sector involvement. Let’s start today”.

Commemoration this year will be held at South Dagon township, Yangon Region, with affected patients and community.

Yangon Region is heavily affected by TB and multi-drug resistant TB. For example, South Dagon township has the second largest TB burden in Myanmar -- with Hlaingtharyar township, also in Yangon Region, the largest.

**date:** 24 March 2019  
**time:** 15:00 - 20:00 hrs  
**venue:** Township hall, Dagon South, Yangon Region