

Summary of Session II

The Role of Public Health in Health Development

Dr. U Ko Ko, Regional Director Emeritus of WHO/SEARO reviewed the role of integrated health care as a holistic approach to Public Health. He stressed the dichotomy between preventive/curative medicine—combined with the existence of scientific advances that do not serve people, and gaps between needs and resources—spurs the search for alternative approaches to meet basic health needs.

He emphasized that health in sustainable development should focus on promoting health in all settings, as well as integrated development to break vicious spirals of poverty and ill health.

In his paper, “**Developing Health Systems: The Potential Contribution of the Roll Back Malaria (RBM)**,” **Dr. Jorn Heldrup, Program Development Officer from WHO, Geneva** explained that the RBM initiative has a flexible strategy, explicit focus on equitable outcomes, consistent technical support, strong advocacy, and working methods which reflect the reality of country-led partnerships.

Recent applied research has proven a range of available interventions to be highly cost-effective in reducing the malaria burden within poor communities. Sustainable availability of these interventions require effective Public Health systems able to empower communities to tackle a range of priority health problems.

Roll Back Malaria illustrates the potential for reducing the malaria burden through cost sharing, decentralization, earmarking resources for priority interventions, strengthening RBM in health sector reforms, sector wide approaches, partnerships, and informing decision makers. Efforts to roll back malaria would only be sustained if they were incorporated within efforts to maintain and further develop health systems and Public Health

efforts. Therefore, the thrust areas identified for the RBM program are comprehensive and in a way distinct from the traditional malaria control program. Dr. Heldrup views RBM as an opportunity to strengthen health systems response to priority Public Health problems.

In many countries, health systems are not equipped to cope with the present demands, not to mention future challenges. Health sector development, thus, becomes a strategic direction for all the work in WHO. Dr. Heldrup summarizes the major challenges confronting health systems to be that of balancing health outcomes and health systems development, health of the poor and disadvantaged, globalization and private sector growth, motivating factors in the health sector, and complex emergencies.

In “**Ethics, Equity, and Human Rights, Dimensions in Strengthening Public Health in Developing Countries**,” **Prof. John Bryant, former Director of Aga Khan Institute of Health Sciences, Karachi**, states that many believe that there are severe inadequacies in how Public Health is conceptualized, made operational, and supported by societies and international organizations.

Prof. Bryant states that traditional principles underlying ethics, equity and human rights have yet to be applied in many situations, particularly in developing countries. These principles are under continuous re-examination in view of new ethical dilemmas that emerged in the health care of individuals and populations, in research involving human subjects, in resource allocation to reduce the burden of disease, and other issues.

In “**Health and Environment—Integration**,” **Prof. John Ashton**, an expert on ecology from the UK argues for an optimum balance between population and resources, with minimal intrusion into the

natural state. He explains that the British Public Health system is dominated by medical professionals. He proposes the concept of Public Health Observatories as possible source of health information. These could function under universities, National Health System or regional parties. Stressing the need for training people in Public Health, Prof. Ashton suggests setting up training units in the community for training people in real-life problems.

Session Discussion Summary:

There was a general opinion that Public Health should be discovered in the communities and their strengths drawn upon. It was felt that doing a skills inventory or assessment of assets would be more beneficial than carrying out a mere assessment of needs.

There was a consensus of opinion that ecological and environmental issues remain neglected areas in Public Health, and receive low priority in most countries. Concern was voiced about successful incorporation of technology-driven activities for Environmental Health in a Public Health system that is often very conservative in developing countries.

There was agreement that RBM strategy needs to be adapted for the country or region and should include appropriate vector control strategies. In India, bed-net use is being advocated in areas, where people do not use conventional beds. In some North Eastern states of India, people are using bed-nets as fishing nets, pillows, or cattle covers. The problem of malaria in some areas, like the Indian State of Goa, is due to migrant labor. This problem calls for specialized programs. Cost-effectiveness issues also merit attention.