

Opening Address at the Inauguration

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Honorable Governor of West Bengal, Honorable Minister of Health, Honorable Secretary of Health, Director General of Health Services, Excellencies, Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen

On behalf of the South-East Asia Regional Office of WHO, it is my great pleasure and privilege to welcome all of you to this landmark Regional Conference on Public Health. I appreciate your kind acceptance of our invitation and the interest you have shown to be here today. The objective of the Conference is to advocate the importance of public health for national, socio-economic and political development, and to promote newer strategies for developing sound public health systems in the new millennium.

I would particularly like to thank His Excellency, the Governor of West Bengal for accepting our invitation to be the Chief Guest and to inaugurate the Conference today, and the Honorable Minister of State for Health and Family Welfare for accepting our invitation to be the Guest of Honour and to deliver an address. We are also thankful to Mr. Javed Chowdhury, Secretary, Health and Dr. S.P. Agarwal, Director General of Health Services for agreeing to deliver addresses. Excellencies, your presence here is the highest expression of the commitment of the Government to improve the public health situation in the country. India's leadership role will make a significant contribution to public health in our region.

I also welcome the distinguished participants from the governments of the countries of the region, as well as the representatives of the UN and bilateral agencies and non-governmental organizations. I particularly thank all of our speakers and resource persons for agreeing to be here.

We are fortunate enough to have with us here some of the best thinkers and practitioners of public

health, as well as some of the key policy makers from our countries. This quality mix should facilitate an exciting exchange of ideas and views, which would enrich the development of public health in the Region. The decisions that you make will help to ensure a fully responsive public health system in our countries. I believe it is entirely appropriate that we chose this great city of Calcutta as the venue for this Conference. Public health in India started here. We are thankful to the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health for kindly agreeing to host the Conference. As the pioneer institution dedicated to public health in this country, we would like to see the All India Institute playing an even bigger leadership role in the next few decades, to facilitate the strengthening of the public health institutions in our Region.

Health is a fundamental human right. This right can be used as an opportunity to strengthen development efforts.

Recently, there have been remarkable breakthroughs in health technology. However, technology alone cannot deliver health. Society has to seriously engage in ensuring equity in health and in the socio-economic aspects of development.

The development of public health in the last century has explicitly demonstrated the growing importance of inter-dependence in international health. During the past two decades, many international agencies, both inter-governmental and non-governmental from within and outside the UN system, have joined WHO in promoting public health development. Each of them has its own comparative advantage. With renewed commitment, WHO under the leadership of Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland has pledged to continue global efforts to improve health outcomes and address the major issues of health development.

We have moved from the original, narrow biomedical view of public health as being measures taken by the public sector and covering subjects such as hygiene, sanitation, nutrition, health education and immunization. Now we visualize public health more comprehensively, as the process to mobilize local, state, national and international resources to ensure the conditions and facilities for healthy living. It covers promotive, preventive, curative and rehabilitative health measures for all people. Public health aims at developing health systems to deliver appropriate and holistic health care to the population.

The denial of access to basic health care is fundamentally linked to poverty. Health systems have difficulty narrowing the gap between the rich and the poor in providing basic care. As economic considerations increasingly influence policy making in health, there is fear that the gap between the rich and the poor may actually widen. Finding the right public health policies to develop strong health systems is a powerful weapon to fight poverty, and WHO is dedicated to this cause.

We in this region need to take a close look at the state of public health, as there is a perception that our public health systems are falling into disarray.

The focus of concern includes the quality of the schools of public health; a shortfall in professional capacities; societal commitment and the realization of national public health goals. In addition, we also need to review the roles of governmental and non-governmental agencies, as well as bilateral and multilateral organizations.

Public health is vital to health development. The worldwide need to improve health at a time of cost containment requires a public health perspective. Training for public health practice and related research are being transformed by new technology. Minimizing the time and cost involved in successful training requires efficient utilization of new technologies and reframed curricula.

We hope the Conference will reemphasize the need for the governments and the people to promote public health as a discipline, to strengthen public health practice, and to develop strong public health education and research institutions.

This should herald the beginning of a major new initiative to improve the systems of public health in the countries of this region.

Once again I thank all of you.