

## **Inaugural Address**

***H.E. Justice Mr. Shyamal Kumar Sen,***

Governor of West Bengal, Calcutta, India

Honorable Mr. N.T. Shanmugam, Minister of State for Health, Government of India; Dr. Uton M. Rafei, Regional Director of WHO; South-East Asia Region; Shri Javed Chowdhury, Secretary of Health; Dr. S.P. Agarwal, Director General Health Services; Dr. Indira Chakravarti; Distinguished Guests, Ladies, and Gentlemen:

It is a pleasure to be present at the inauguration of the Regional Conference of Public Health in South-East Asia in the Twenty-first Century. While the member countries of WHO in the South-East Asia region have made remarkable progress during the past five decades, the demographic transitions, combined with environmental and socioeconomic changes (including globalization and privatization) pose daunting challenges to health development. To meet the needs, the ministers of health of different countries have adopted a Declaration on Health in the twenty-first century. This conference aims to advocate the importance of public health for health and socioeconomic development, and also to promote new concepts and strategies in public health practice and education.

The development of Health for All is one of the primary challenges that South-East Asia will face in the twenty-first century. It appears that the purpose of this conference is to trace the importance of public health for socioeconomic and political development. The Declaration on Health Development in the South-East Asia region in the twenty-first century includes the following objectives.

First, closing the health gaps and inequities in our societies is critical. Second, conditions must be created that promote health and self-reliance. Third, basic health services to all, especially poor women and other vulnerable groups, must be ensured. Fourth, health ethics must be upheld and enforced. Finally, health must be placed at the

center of development. These are, in my view, vitally important objectives in any civilized society. Good public health is the mainstay of our efforts to provide a better quality of life to our people. The overall objective of this conference is to advocate the importance of public health for national health, socioeconomic, and political development, and to promote concepts and strategies for developing health systems in the new millennium.

This conference's initiative is to bring together leaders in public health education and services, as well as bilateral and multilateral agencies, to discuss and identify the issues that will help strengthen public health in South-East Asia. I am happy that India, the country with the largest population in the area, has been chosen to host the conference.

It may be noted that, notwithstanding achievements regarding life expectancy, infant mortality, and health technology development and research, we continue to confront many communicable diseases, both old and emerging, which disable and destroy many lives. The region's population continues to grow rapidly. A home to one quarter of the world's people, our region has increased its population by one third in the last fifteen years, and is expected to reach a billion in the year 2000. Our region harbors nearly one half of the world's poor, who have limited access to health facilities. Inequities are worsened by the absence of adequate female inheritance, as well as the lack of education for women, especially poor women. The maternal morbidity rate and domestic violence are serious concerns in our region, with inadequate education affecting their offspring, also.

Despite the growth of the pharmaceutical sector, medications of good quality are not universally available. Also, the challenge of irrational and in-

discriminate prescribing practices lead to multi-drug resistance.

To develop strategies and to resolve problems are, indeed, pressing concerns. Health professionals and opinion makers continue to place low priority on primary health care, health promotion, health problem prevention, and rehabilitation services, especially for poor women and other vulnerable groups. Overcoming these problems is the government's responsibility, in collaboration with the people, various NGOs, and private sector groups. We must trust our partners, catalyze a demand from the people, establish priorities and

standards, and stimulate growth with incentives and regulations. Until now, the health sector has primarily worked in isolation, yet other sectors have an important role in extending a healthy life to our people. I take this opportunity to express my appreciation for the extraordinary work accomplished by WHO in South-East Asia's health sector, and I hope that this Conference will make progress in benefiting the societies of our regions.

With these words, I inaugurate the conference.

Thank you.