

Address at the Inaugural Session

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Your Excellency, Mr. Shyamal Kumar Sen, Governor of West Bengal; Honorable Union Health Minister, Mr. N.T. Shanmugam; Dr. Uton Rafei; Dr. S.P. Agarwal; Professor Indira Chakravarti; and Distinguished Participants.

I am, indeed, very pleased to be at the Regional Conference on Public Health in South-East Asia in the Twenty-first century; the South-East Regional Office of WHO needs to be congratulated. The old adage, "Prevention is better than the cure," is observed more in the teachings than in the practice of our daily lives, and nowhere is that more pronounced than in health-related matters. A large number of the communicable and non-communicable diseases that we have in the developing world are essentially the result of the neglect of public health. Both government and society should assume this responsibility equally.

When the country became independent, a number of important issues, such as the eradication of smallpox and malaria and the initiation of the BCG vaccine program, were initiated as a truly committed national effort. We have been able to eradicate smallpox and achieve some success in the eradication of malaria. The 1960s and the 1970s were eras of a gradual shift of emphasis from preventive care to specialized tertiary care, which was capital-intensive, and urban-oriented.

In the process, we could have created a very good health care infrastructure, but public health issues have lost priority. Commitment of resources to eradicate leprosy and tuberculosis has become minimal, and another resurgence of malaria, in a more virulent form, has resulted. We also now have diseases like HIV/AIDS and its co-infection, tuberculosis, as well as dengue and other diseases. New lifestyle diseases, like diabetes, strokes, cardiovascular dis-

eases, and cancer have merely compounded our problems.

An increase in infections and diseases, such as cholera, gastroenteritis, and sexually transmitted diseases, have only served to prove the importance of promoting public health and hygiene. The need to replace public health to a priority is evident.

In the prevention of communicable and non-communicable diseases, India has made impressive gains. In the ninth Five Year Plan, Rs 30 billion was committed to communicable disease prevention, of which Rs 18 billion was from external funding. In the past four years, 9 million cataract operations were performed, from a total backlog of 11 million. Leprosy has nearly reached elimination levels in almost all parts of the country, except in the five states of Bihar, Orissa, UP, and, regrettably, West Bengal. Intensified efforts for the next three to four years would also see us achieving the elimination target of 1 per 10,000 prevalence by 2003-4. The modified strategy of dots for tuberculosis control and the awareness and intervention programs launched under the HIV/AIDS Control Program indicate the changing prioritization of the various health sector branches.

I hope that the Calcutta Declaration, which is to be declared on the concluding day of the conference, will give the necessary impetus to the public health programs in India. I hope that the deliberations and discussions in the conference will help to achieve the specified objectives of identifying major challenges and opportunities for strengthening public health systems in the new millennium.

Thank you.