

Address by Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations

Geneva, Tuesday, 19 May 2009

It is a great honour for me to participate in and address this august World Health Assembly at a critical juncture for global health. At the outset, I would like to highly commend Dr Chan for her extraordinary leadership in addressing this crisis in close coordination with the Members States. I also want to salute the ministers and public health leaders for their hard work not only in this crisis, but also for their response to health challenges each and every day. Mrs Sarah Brown, thank you for being here to share your voice.

This morning I visited the JW Lee Strategic Health Operations Centre at WHO. They call it the SHOC room, but I have a confession to make: I was not shocked. I was very much energized. Energized by the professionalism, dedication and commitment of WHO staff and colleagues from Member States and collaborating centres. They are the face of the global response to a global crisis. They are the symbol of multilateral cooperation at its best. Thank you for doing so much to build a healthier world.

Here, today, the H1N1 strain of influenza A is Topic A. This outbreak spotlights yet again the interconnected nature of our world. Geography does not guarantee immunity. A threat to one is a challenge to all. From the beginning, I have been in constant contact with Dr Chan. I know there are still many unanswered questions about this new virus. We do not yet know how far and how fast it will spread, how serious the illnesses will be, and, indeed, how many lives will be lost. As previous pandemics have shown, the situation can unfold in stages – what begins as mild in the first stage might be less so in the next. That is why the WHO has not let down its guard. That is why the world must remain vigilant and alert to the warning signs.

The spread of the H1N1 virus illustrates some of the fundamental truths of public health. It helps us better understand the challenge we face today: how do we build resilience in an age of unpredictability and interconnection? You are a big part of the answer. That is clear from the steps that you have taken in the last weeks, and the lessons we have learnt.

First, we have learnt that your hard work has paid dividends. Advance planning for a pandemic has served the world community well. We have never been better prepared to respond.

Second, we have learnt the value of transparency. We must know what is going on. The response to the flu pandemic shows just what is possible in terms of real-time information and intelligence.

Third, we have learnt the value of investment in strong public health systems.

They are the guardians of good health in normal times and the bedrock of our response to the new outbreaks and emerging diseases.

Fourth, we have learnt the value of coordination – between agencies and countries, between the public, private and voluntary sector. That is why Dr Chan and I met this morning with executives of the main vaccine producers. Partnerships with the private sector are absolutely vital going forward. But we are also learning that coordination is not an end in itself.

That is my fifth and fundamental point, solidarity. Global solidarity must be at the heart of the world's response to this crisis. Solidarity in the face of this particular outbreak must mean that all have access to drugs and vaccines. It means that virus samples and data are shared. It means that self-defeating restrictions on trade and travel are avoided. It means that WHO and other vital bodies have the resources they need when they need them. It means that we all act in the interests of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world. I pledge my full commitment.

We have been talking about the crisis of the day – but we are here at this Assembly to look beyond. To get to the fundamentals. Why did I make global health one of my top priorities as Secretary General of the United Nations? Because health is fundamental to everything we do at the United Nations. A healthier world is a better world, a safer world, and a more just world. If we fall short on health, we cannot simply go back later and pick up where we left off. There is no pause button. There is only rewind.

Children start falling ill again from preventable diseases. Families suffer. Communities break down. In the blink of an eye, the damage to generations can be too far gone. That is why I say that cutting investment on health at times of recession is not just morally wrong, it is economically foolish. And it is why we must continue to engage.

We must also be realistic. Yes, we need more resources. But we also must do more with what we have now. There are two overriding realities. On the one hand, this is a world of multiple crises. Problems do not stay confined to tidy corners. On the other hand, this is an age of austerity. Budgets everywhere are getting squeezed. Then how do we move forward from here? By thinking imaginatively. By working the interconnections. As Dr Chan so effectively reminds us, we must remember health is an outcome of all policies.

As we seek out connections, there is perhaps no single issue that ties together the security, prosperity and progress of our world than women's health. It touches the heart of every issue and the soul of everybody, every society. Everywhere, especially in the poorest countries, women's health is the nation's health. Women, after all, care for the children. Women often grow the crops. Women hold families together. Women are in the majority as societies age. Women are the weavers of the fabric of society.

In my first year as Secretary General, I convened leaders from the United Nations system, the world of philanthropy, the private sector and civil society to focus on 21st century health priorities. They all agreed: we must begin with maternal health. We know the alarming statistics. Every year, another half a million mothers die from complications during pregnancy and childbirth. But we also know that maternal health is a key barometer of a functioning health system. If a health system is available and accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week and capable of handling normal deliveries and emergencies, then it is equipped to provide a wide range of other services as well. In other words, maternal health is the mother of all health challenges.

Today, maternal mortality is the slowest moving target of all the Millennium Development Goals – and that is an outrage. Together, let us make maternal health the priority it must be. In the 21st century, no woman should have to give her life to give life.

Let me close by saying I know that we can do all of these things. My confidence is not based just on wishful thinking. It is rooted in progress that you have achieved through the years. Fighting polio. Wiping out smallpox. Eradicating guinea worm.

Increasing access to HIV/AIDS prevention care and treatment and leading the way on tobacco control. Much, much more is needed and much, much more is possible.

Whether the meltdown is in the polar icecaps or the financial markets, we must continue to connect our common challenges. And the fight must be joined. That means nurturing more partnerships. To strengthen health delivery. To ensure that well-trained staff provide safe and effective services. To innovate and find smarter ways of working, of using new technology, of raising resources. And that will take the continued leadership and example from ministers of health and from your World Health Organization.

When crisis looms, the story is often told in numbers: how many people's lives are at risk, how many more will be pushed into poverty, how many jobs are threatened.

Understanding the magnitude of the threat is part of our job in the United Nations.

We work with our Member States and spring into action. We offer food and shelter.

We help keep the peace. But that is only part of our responsibility. The bigger part is prevention – what we can do to prevent the worst of those predictions from coming true. In so many ways, that means you.

Let us stay fixed on the fundamental that is health. Let us connect the power to get results with the principles of global social justice. This is how we will make the global community more resilient. This is how we ensure that wherever the next threat to health, peace or economic stability may emerge, we will be ready and we must be ready. I thank you for showing the way.

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