Address

By

Dr Samlee Plianbangchang
Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia

At

Inauguration of University of Public Health

Yangon, Myanmar
16 July 2007
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DR SAMLEE PLIANBANGCHANG
REGIONAL DIRECTOR, WHO SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Your Excellency Prof. Kyaw Myint, Minister of Health;

Your Excellency Prof. Mya Oo, Deputy Minister of Health;

Your Excellency Prof. Paing Soe, Deputy Minister of Health;

Respected Dr U Ko Ko, WHO Regional Director Emeritus;

Honourable guests;

Ladies and gentlemen;

We have every reason to believe that future achievements in health development depend on strong public health systems and a robust public health infrastructure.

Changes around us, nationally and internationally, are posing formidable health challenges. These challenges need effective public health interventions to be overcome. Among others, the important health challenges that we are facing today include:

- Emerging and re-emerging diseases, both communicable and non-communicable;
- Health consequences from global warming, which are worsening by the day.
- Increasing health emergencies due to disasters, natural and man-made;
• Health emergencies due to disease outbreaks with increasing frequency and severity;

• Unrelenting spread of HIV/AIDS, with no effective solution in sight, and not the least important,

• The impact on public health of international trade liberalization, which seems to have no easy solution at the moment.

At the same time, the new global health development strategy has moved steadily towards primary prevention. This is with the aim to reduce disease burden; and ultimately to also reduce poverty in the community. Health interventions are now focusing, more and more, on determinants and risks, and, therefore, the focus of health development is being geared towards health promotion and disease prevention.

The aim of health development today is moving to the following directions:

• Promoting optimal growth and development for everyone;

• Maintaining good health for all at all time, and

• Promoting healthy longevity of life, which is socially and economically productive.

People will continue to fall sick, and they will need effective and affordable treatment in medical facilities. Today, more and more, health issues are becoming public concern. These concerns then become the subjects for public debate at both the national and international levels. And, more and more, health concerns are highlighted in political agendas for social and economic development.
We need to strengthen urgently our public health systems and infrastructure. This is in order for us to be able to face today’s health challenges very squarely, and for us to be able to tackle health problems in the most efficient and effective manner. I am very pleased that this University of Public Health is being inaugurated. The University will certainly contribute very significantly to the development of the public health workforce in Myanmar. This is the first, but most important, step in strengthening public health systems in the country. With a competent and vibrant public health workforce, other aspects of the public health infrastructure will surely be improved.

The University will be a centre of excellence in public health that will serve the national interest in the development and promotion of health for all people. These include:

- the development that promotes equity and social justice in health care and services;
- the development that ensures reaching the unreached everywhere;
- the development that promotes the use of community resources and assets for local health care; and
- the development that promotes social control of health technology; the technology that is appropriate to the local specific situation; socially, culturally and economically.

The PHC approach is an important public health tool to ensure the attainment of health for all, whereby all people can lead socially and economically productive lives. PHC must be accorded the right place in our public health systems, and, the promotion of PHC must be carried out within the public health context.

At the same time, Public health interventions and services that we are longing for must be:
• designed to serve the entire population in rural and urban communities;
• interventions that are ecologically, epidemiologically and environmentally based;
• interventions and services that are developed within the local socio-cultural and economic and political framework;
• interventions and services that are designed for implementation through multidisciplinary and multisectoral approaches;
• interventions and services that promote “health for all through all for health;” which can be realized through educational processes to empower the entire population, and
• the interventions and services that pay special attention to the poor, underserved, underprivileged, marginalized and vulnerable.

These are some thoughts, among others, which may be useful for consideration in the further development of this University of Public Health. I am certain that the university will become an indispensable institution to provide crucial back-up support to health development for all people in Myanmar. This certainly includes role of the University in the development of community health work, which is among many other functions of the University. The Community health work is the backbone of health development for the entire population in any community. It is the health work that is performed primarily by community health workers of various categories and community health volunteers. These people are an important part of the public health workforce, and they are in addition to public health professionals and experts. Public health professionals and experts are those who provide institutional and referral support to community health work. They, public health professionals and experts, are to provide crucial back-up support to health work at the grassroots levels.

This University of Public Health will have an overriding responsibility for the development and strengthening of these professionals and experts, so that they can contribute effectively, among others, to the development of community health workers and
community health volunteers. The university can also help in a big way in the strengthening of referral systems by providing technical back-up. In this connection, we have to keep in mind that community health work cannot go the whole distance alone. Referral facilities for primary, secondary and tertiary care are important to effective community health work.

Excellencies, WHO will continue providing unwavering support to the next phase of development of this University of Public Health. In addition, the University can benefit from inter-institutional information exchange through the South-East Asia Public Health Education Institution Network (SEAPHEIN), and inter-institutional cooperation with related institutions in other countries of the Region.

We are living in an interconnected, interlinked and interdependent world, wherein global citizens share almost everything, including health risks. Work of this University of Public Health will in future surely transcend national boundaries. The decision to establish this University is indeed an important milestone in the history of health development in Myanmar. It is really a noble decision by the Government, as far as the health of the people of Myanmar is concerned. I sincerely congratulate the Government of Myanmar for this crucial move.

As part of the overall framework to strengthen public health system in this country, I once again, on behalf of WHO in the South-East Asia Region, pledge our unstinted commitment to supporting the next steps in the development of the University of Public Health in Myanmar. And I promise to collaborate closely with the University in forging ahead towards the ultimate goal of securing health for all in the country.

Thank you.