

Primary Health Care

Summary of discussions at the 124th session of the WHO Executive Board meeting, 19-26 January 2009

The 124th session of the WHO Executive Board (19-26 January) examined Primary Health Care (PHC), which was just one of the many issues before it. WHO's extensive consultations on PHC renewal culminated in the 2008 World Health Report, launched in Kazakhstan last October to coincide with the 30th anniversary of the Alma Ata Declaration. PHC was the topic of the Director-General's first Global Health Seminar in January. Dr Chan said "A primary health care approach is the most efficient, fair, and cost-effective way to organize a health system. It can prevent much of the disease burden, and it can also prevent people with minor complaints from flooding the emergency wards of hospitals. Decades of experience tell us that primary health care produces better outcomes at lower costs, and with higher patient or user satisfaction".

Executive Board Members resoundingly backed PHC renewal. Representatives from thirty-one Member States and **six non-governmental organisations** took the floor in support of this initiative. "Primary health care means value for money" said Dr Dahl-Regis, Chief Medical Officer of the Bahamas. Ms Roche from the Ministry of Health, New Zealand noted their recently adopted PHC approach was already proving to be cost-effective and was demonstrating measurable reductions in health inequities. Dr Wright from the Department of Health and Human Services, USA, confirmed that PHC was a critical component of health care in all countries and that robust data and evidence were important drivers of effectiveness. Mr Ould Jiddou from the Ministry of Health Mauritania referred to the Ouagadougou Declaration signed by African Ministers of Health in April 2008. The Declaration commits Member States of the region to addressing eight priority issues that are impeding progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals, including the need to rebuild and strengthen community services and reduce the fragmented approach to service provision resulting from poorly coordinated programmes. Achieving universal access means that services must be "people-based rather than provider-based." Speaking on behalf of the Eastern Mediterranean countries, Dr Bin Shakar from the Ministry of Health, United Arab Emirates described how PHC had already ensured that more than 20 million people received access to services, including maternal and child health and mental health care, in recent years. The region is striving to apply a PHC approach to strengthen health systems capacity in countries afflicted by crises. Executive Board Members Professor Sohn Myong-sei, from the Korean Academy of Medical Sciences and Dr Mohamed, from the Ministry of Health, Oman introduced separate resolutions for the Executive Board's consideration. The Executive Board noted that PHC values and principles are timeless and global in their application. The challenge, it was pointed out, is to adapt them to today's world in ways that meet the needs and conditions of individual countries. The 2008 World Health Report - Primary Health Care Now More than Ever - was lauded as both an inspiration and a guide, and its four-policy directions were widely endorsed.