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Inaugural Address

By

R Premadasa
ADDRESS OF THE HON. R. PREMADASA
Prime Minister of Sri Lanka

I am happy to inaugurate this International Conference on Health and Media. This Conference is going to be extremely useful and timely for more than one reason. On the one hand it will bring to focus the vast technological and scientific achievements made in Mass Media and Global Communication. On the other hand it would revamp the commitment of the international community towards the achievement of Health for All by the year 2000. I firmly believe that if we can bring about a happy marriage between Health and Media, half the battle could be won with the least effort. In my capacity as Chairman of the National Health Council of Sri Lanka, I am very interested in your deliberations.

I note that the organisers of this meeting - the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) based in Singapore, has brought together international expertise that is relevant to the theme of the Conference. I see here not only Public Health decision makers and Mass Media experts from different parts of Asia but also representatives of the co-sponsoring International Organisations such as WHO, UNESCO and IPDC.

I firmly subscribe to the view that in anything we do, we must get our objectives clearly defined. I note with a sense of satisfaction that your primary objective is to create greater awareness on the role of mass media in the health and well-being of the people. You will be exploring possibilities of forging a lasting partnership between health and media people. You will also be formulating a series of public health and mass media projects that can be implemented by the countries of the region. This is a practical approach. As such, I am confident that something concrete and meaningful will emerge from your deliberations.
It is now established that mass media represent a most cost effective means of getting across health related knowledge to the large mass of the population. So much so that I cannot see how else the package of primary health care can be brought into the living rooms of billions of people so fast, so effectively and so cheaply.

Fire is a good servant but a bad master. Therefore, it has to be carefully handled. Media too should be used for the greater good. Today, young people in particular are influenced by bad practices some of which are influenced by the mass media. I refer in particular to violence, smoking, alcoholism, drug abuse and such other practices which are socially and morally alien to us. On the other hand the message of immunization of children against the six major killer diseases reached millions of people through the slogan "Immunise Your Child Today" which was painted on the turf when the 1st Test Match was being played between India and Sri Lanka the week before last. In this manner mass media has been successfully employed by Health Educators the world over to combat ignorance, inhibitions, malnutrition and bring about good health and sanitation. Vast attitudial changes and for that matter dramatic changes in life styles have been brought about by the successful application of the media.

The media can also play many supporting roles such as in training Community Health Workers and supplementing the work of the Health Workers while all the time acting in line and length with the primary health care system.

It is often said that the media can act irresponsibly and negate all the good work that has been going on. The media should reflect a degree of compatibility between Government policy on health and those related to other development objectives such as industries, tourism and agricultural development. Certain countries have banned advertising cigarettes and liquor on television, radio, press, etc. In many developing countries, such enlightened policies have not been introduced. In such instances, the media men have a
great moral and social responsibility. They should enforce their own code of ethics which after all is for the good of the whole human race.

Many of the Asian countries are still inflicted with high rates of maternal and infant mortality. Water borne diseases, malnutrition and infectious diseases such as measles, polio, malaria and tetanus are also responsible for the high rate of mortality. It is a pity that blindness related directly to malnutrition is extremely high in some countries. On the other side of the coin, there are some countries which have achieved higher levels of economic development. But they are confronted with degenerative diseases such as cancer, heart disease and the lifestyle related health problems such as alcoholism and drug abuse.

"Health For All by the year 2000" drives a sense of urgency in finding solutions to these health problems. The fact that a well organised package of primary health care can cut down nearly 50% of hospital admissions augurs well for the future. Primary health care by and large is concerned with preventive health care. Unfortunately, 65% of the national health budget is being spent on curative health; that is, on hospitals, drugs, operations, etc. A fire that could have been extinguished with a bucket of water now demands fire engines. That is why we should take a fresh look at our health policies and strategies. There has to be a complete re-ordering of our approach to health issues. I hope the health and media experts who are gathered here will be able to have a fresh look at this colossal waste of money.

As far as the media professionals are concerned there is a need to bring about a scientific and systematic approach to the problems of public health communication. You cannot embark on media campaigns just for the sake of doing so. The type, nature and scope of your media projects should be determined on technical, scientific, and statistical findings. Your efforts will bear full results if they are target oriented and carefully planned and executed. The different tools and techniques available to you
should be deployed with a meaning and purpose. The different media should act in consonance and not at cross purposes.

I would like to remind this Conference of what the Lord Buddha said on good health more than 2,500 years ago - "Arogya Parama Labha" - Good health is the most supreme acquisition. During each age we re-discover the truth of this anew. A happy synthesis between health and media signifies material profit both to the individual and to the national economy through savings in the personal and national health bills. Therefore, I would like health and media to enter into a profitable partnership. A partnership which will eventually ensure both personal gain and national prosperity.

In conclusion, let me thank the organisers of this Conference for their initiative and enthusiasm in the area of vital concern to all our countries and all our people. I wish your Conference all success.