

WHO highlights key health issues in South-East Asia

30 August 2013 | News | By BioSpectrum Bureau

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The thirty-first meeting of health ministers of the south east asian region will be held on September 10 at New Delhi. The health minister's meeting is a forum for exchange of national experiences on the political, social and economic dimensions of health. The meeting is being hosted by Mr Ghulam Nabi Azad, union minister for health and family welfare, government of India.

This will be followed by the Sixty-sixth Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia. The Regional Committee is a statutory body comprising the Member countries,* which meets once a year to review progress and regional implications of the World Health Assembly decisions and to map the way forward.

Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General, and Dr Samlee Plianbangchang, WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia, will be present with their team of senior advisers at both meetings. Some of the key technical discussions to be taken up at the two sessions are:

High blood pressure and its health implications. The Meeting of Ministers of Health will discuss ways to address this leading risk factor for mortality in the Region. The ministers are expected to adopt the 'New Delhi Declaration on High Blood Pressure'.

The regional committee meeting will include discussion on key technical issues, including:

Universal health coverage (UHC): The goal of universal health coverage is to ensure that all people obtain the health services they need without suffering financial hardship when paying for them. Evidence indicates that two areas cause significant inequities and inefficiencies in health in the Region: first, direct out-of-pocket payments for access to care that can push households into poverty; and, second, a significant proportion of these payments go towards the purchase of medicines. Accordingly, the WHO Regional Strategy for Universal Health Coverage recommends that countries strengthen their health systems based on the primary health care approach - focusing on public health including prevention and promotion activities;

using appropriate technologies; and based on domestic resources as far as possible.

Targets for prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs): NCDs are the leading cause of mortality globally and in the Region. Each year around 7.9 million people die due to NCDs accounting for 55% of all deaths in the Region. The Sixty-sixth World Health Assembly adopted a resolution endorsing the Global Plan of Action for Prevention and Control of NCDs for 2013 to 2020. Nine global voluntary targets were adopted to tackle the four key areas of concern - cardiovascular diseases, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes. In addition to adopting the nine global voluntary targets, Member States of the South-East Asia Region are expected to consider reduction of household air pollution as an additional target for the Region. The Regional Committee will also deliberate on the Regional Action Plan for Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases.

Measles elimination and rubella control: Measles remains a significant cause of morbidity and mortality in the Region accounting for about half the estimated global measles deaths in 2011. The countries of the Region are expected to set a measles elimination target at the meeting. Most countries of the Region have already reduced measles deaths by 70% by stepping up routine immunization coverage enhanced by supplementary campaigns.