

Delhi hosts health ministers of South East Asia, NCDs on top priority

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The health ministers from eleven countries of World Health Organization's (WHO) South-East Asia Region will meet in New Delhi from September 10 to 13 to discuss key health issues facing the Region.

The 31st meeting of health ministers of the region will be held on September 10. The meeting, a forum for exchange of national experiences on the political, social and economic dimensions of health, is being hosted by union health minister Ghulam Nabi Azad.

This will be followed by the 66th session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia. The Regional Committee is a statutory body comprising the member countries and 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. The meeting of ministers 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.

Another key area of discussion will be targets for prevention and control of non-communicable 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 per cent of all deaths in the Region.

Measles elimination and rubella control will be another agenda for discussion. 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 per cent by stepping up routine immunization coverage enhanced by supplementary campaigns.