

SPEECH BY THE HON LAWRENCE GONZI, PRIME MINISTER DURING THE OPENING SESSION OF THE SIXTY-SECOND SESSION OF THE WHO REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR EUROPE, HILTON HOTEL, SAINT JULIAN'S - MONDAY 10TH SEPTEMBER 2012

**Your Royal Highness
Madame Director General
Madame Regional Director
Ministers
Distinguished guests**

On behalf of the Government and people of Malta, it is an honour for me to welcome the World Health Organisation Regional Committee for Europe and all you delegates to Malta.

Your being here allows you to not only network and to participate in the various workshops being organised, but it also allows you to experience Malta's unique history and culture.

As an island state in the crossroads of the Mediterranean Sea, Malta has throughout its history had a very close relationship with medicine and medical care.

The hospitallier order of the Knights of Saint John built the so called *Sacra Infirmaria*, which was regarded as one of Europe's finest hospitals at the time.

Further on, the unfortunate experience of wars earned Malta the reputation of 'Nurse of the Mediterranean.' When recently faced by the human tragedy of immigration and the Libyan Crisis, Malta once again stood up to its vocation.

However, we are not only proud of our medical history but above all we are proud of all our doctors, nurses and health professionals. It is your unconditional care, dedication and sacrifice that make us all proud of you and your work.

It is with these sentiments in mind that I welcome the sixty second session of the World Health Organisation Regional Committee for Europe here in Malta. Back in 1970, soon after joining the World Health Organisation, Malta hosted the 20th session of this regional committee. Allow me to pay tribute to former Minister for Health Dr Alexander Cachia Zammit who is present with us this morning and who had chaired that session of the regional committee.

Dear delegates

This session comes at indeed an opportune time. Sadly enough, we are here discussing public health when the world itself is not in very good health.

We are surrounded by financial austerity and growing unemployment.

We are experiencing extreme weather events and natural disasters including floods and famines further intensifying existing humanitarian crises.

We are also realising that we are susceptible to global threats and pandemics.

All of this is coupled by other long-standing challenges such as an ageing population, especially in the Western world.

Operating in this volatile environment presents governments all over the world with a tremendous challenge. Unfortunately, such a challenge is too often perceived as a threat to the very sustainability of the health system. However, such a challenge, like all other challenges, must be seen and taken as an opportunity.

This offers us an opportunity to stop and think, an opportunity to evaluate past practices, an opportunity to prioritise needs, an opportunity to introduce new systems of management and also an opportunity to introduce new systems of governance in the health sector.

This is Malta's challenge as much as it is the World Health Organisation's challenge, but above all, it is Malta's opportunity as much as it is the World Health Organisation's opportunity.

Dear delegates

As we devise and implement policies as governments and as international bodies and organisations, let us not lose sight of our common values.

The health profession is built on values, especially on the dignity of human life and on the belief that everyone has a right to medical care. Equity and universal access to healthcare remain important values which should motivate us in prioritising healthcare reforms and investments.

It is with a deep sense of pride that I stand here and reaffirm my Government's commitment to providing a health service freely accessible to all citizens. Health was and remains one of my Government's key policy pillars and we consider it to be a cornerstone of our sustainable development agenda.

Throughout these past four challenging years, we continued to increase our investment in health, introducing new services and embarking on new investment projects. Our philosophy is to continue building a strong and vibrant economy to sustain our investment in healthcare. We have and are managing, as Malta's economy outperforms many other European states.

Our positive economic performance has given us the possibility of continuing to invest substantially in our health service, in its infrastructure, its equipment and above all in its human resources.

This investment has allowed us to make significant progress in the quality of service provided with new records of service delivery being achieved. Concurrently, we have continued to invest in our educational structure which now permits Maltese doctors to specialise locally, thus stopping a brain drain we had suffered from for far too long.

We are continuing with our policy of investing in new and modern equipment and the new oncology hospital that is being built is testimony to this. We have also started with a refurbishment of our community health centres with a view of providing more care in the community. We remain committed to strengthening our people-centred health systems and public health capacity.

However, healthcare is not only about equipment. Our focus needs to be the general well-being of citizens. Closely linked to this is the issue of preventive care and services. Over the past three years we have introduced a national breast screening programme and we are about to roll-out a national colorectal screening programme for males. Our vision is to invest in health through a life course approach and empowering people through health promotion programmes.

Concurrently, we are investing heavily in creating health and supportive environments. We have invested in outdoor open spaces for our families, clean energy, sports facilities and in a low emission public transport system.

In the light of the above, Malta endorses the Health 2020 policy document. This value-based and action-oriented policy framework is reflected in my Government's work programme and vision for health care.

Dear delegates

Public health and the broader global environment that we are operating in, present a number of significant challenges to us all.

Let us not be discouraged or lose sight of our strengths.

The World Health Organisation has always stood up to the challenges it faced and it is through your engagement as delegates that we have made big strides in health care.

Once again it is our duty to show our citizens that we care about their health.

I am confident that the sixty second session of the World Health Organisation Regional Committee for Europe here in Malta will serve as an important catalyst for further progress in health care.

Thank you.