



International anniversary conference marking 35 years of the Declaration of Alma-Ata on primary health care

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Opening Remarks

5 minutes

Your Excellency Mr Vice-Prime Minister, honourable ministers, distinguished delegates and partners, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a real honour and privilege to be addressing such a distinguished audience at this international conference marking the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Declaration of Alma-Ata on primary health care. I would like to thank the Government of Kazakhstan for continuing the tradition of hosting this global event every five years since 1978.

The Declaration of Alma-Ata in 1978 was a landmark for public health in the twentieth century. Its vision, values and principles, which are all still valid today, played a pivotal role in global health since then.

Alma-Ata was ahead of its time; it was visionary. It was the first declaration underlining the importance of primary health care and putting health equity on the international agenda for the first time. That is why primary health care approach has since then been accepted by WHO Member States as the key to the attainment of the goal of health for all. That is why strengthening primary health care has been crucial in improving population health and building more equitable societies.

The Declaration started a new paradigm by identifying economic and social development as a prerequisite to the attainment of health for all, thus introducing the notion of intersectoral work. This opened up the work of WHO towards all those determinants that influence health.

It declared participation of people in planning and implementing their health care as a human right and duty. It called for community participation, which today we call horizontal and participatory governance.

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And that is why there is no any other declaration or commitment that is referred to and remembered as vividly as the Alma-Ata Declaration worldwide. Now let me pay my greatest respect and gratitude to His Excellency Professor Turgeldy S. Sharmanov, who played a crucial role in Alma-Ata Conference and Declaration in 1978. We are honoured to have you with us today.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Alma-Ata initiated the Health for All movement in WHO, which led to significant changes in the way health and health systems were approached. This revolutionary approach led to significant improvements in global and regional health. Member States in the WHO European Region played a pioneering role in putting the values and principles of Alma Ata Declaration into practice and primary health care has become core to providing health services and improving overall health outcomes.

The way forward is promising, but a lot remains to be done to address many challenges ahead of us in our Region, as well as globally. As the video message of WHO Director-General Dr Margaret Chan reminded us, challenges such as persistent health inequities, the demographic shift, co- and multiple morbidities, along with a rise in noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and the persistence of communicable diseases such as tuberculosis (TB) and HIV, do not allow us to rest on our achievements. As you all know very well, these challenges call for innovative approaches and new ideas to define adequate responses.

The time has now come to renew our commitments, stressing the critical role of primary health care in achieving universal health coverage. It is time to revisit the current identity of primary health care, to support countries in designing strategies to innovate in primary health care in response to current changes and challenges.

What role should primary health care play while staying true to the values and principles of Alma-Ata: equitable access and health as a basic human right? How can we organize primary health care that supports intersectoral delivery of health care and public health services in times of financial uncertainty, changing demography and population health needs?

There is a need to bring comprehensive health services closer to the population and to take people's needs and preferences into account. In order to achieve this transformation, it is of utmost importance that we integrate primary health care with public health services – including protection, promotion and prevention, and following a life-course approach.

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Another key area for consideration is the interface between primary health care and other levels and settings, especially hospitals and specialized services, to be able to provide the right care in the right setting in a continuum of care, again through a life-course approach.

And, ladies and gentlemen, this endeavour cannot be achieved by the health sector alone, but must be a joint effort, a movement towards whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches, in order to truly capture the meaning of health in all policies. And it has to be inclusive, covering all segments of the population: the poor, displaced persons, immigrants, members of ethnic minorities and other so-called vulnerable groups that require our attention and inclusion.

Our response will have to acknowledge the necessity to put in place governance, financing and organizational arrangements that are supportive to provide the right incentives and skill mix to enable provision of high-quality, people-centred health service. Furthermore, we need to make proper use of information and communication technologies to create a flexible and responsive primary health care.

All these are further refined in the WHO European Region's policy framework for health and well-being, Health 2020. This overarching policy framework calls for high-quality, coordinated/integrated, people-centred health systems, in which primary health care is recognized to play a pivotal role. Primary health care is also at the centre of the implementation of the WHO European Action Plan for Strengthening Public Health Capacities and Services.

I am grateful to the Government of Kazakhstan for not only hosting this event but also its commitment to invest in a "WHO centre of excellence on primary health care" in Almaty! This offer by Kazakhstan was approved by the other WHO European Member States during the Regional Committee in September this year. The centre will be crucial in strengthening primary health care in the Region to achieve our overarching vision of universal health coverage and high-quality, equitable coordinated/integrated care.

With this, I want to wish us all an inspiring conference and lively discussions, taking advantage of the historic dimension and momentum for transformation that is instilled by the spirit of the Declaration of Alma-Ata, even 35 years after its adoption.

Dear colleagues and friends, thank you for your kind attention.