

COMMONWEALTH HEALTH MINISTERS MEETING, 2008

Chair's Statement

Geneva, 18 May 2008

Commonwealth Ministers of Health held their annual meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, on the eve of the 61st World Health Assembly. The theme of the meeting was 'E-Health: Challenges and Opportunities'. The meeting was chaired by Hon John Herbert Maginley Minister of Health, Antigua and Barbuda.

Ministers congratulated H E Kamalesh Sharma on assumption of the post of Commonwealth Secretary-General. They welcomed his contribution to the meeting and commended his vision for health, including e-health, in the Commonwealth.

The meeting was enriched by addresses from Rt. Rev Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Dr Margaret Chan, Director General, World Health Organization for which Ministers expressed their sincere gratitude.

Ministers recognised the great opportunity that technological development and expansion presents in increasing access to good preventive and curative healthcare and services. Ministers discussed ways in which e-health could be used to improve health system delivery in all countries irrespective of income status or developmental stage, noting that members could identify and utilise the technology that was most suitable for their specific circumstances.

Ministers noted the critical role of the private sector, health workers, and civil society in expanding e-health initiatives. Ministers noted that although the Commonwealth has 30 per cent of the global population, 43 per cent of all internet users are in the Commonwealth. They further noted that from 2000-2007, there had been an increase of 460 per cent in internet usage in the Commonwealth, compared to a global increase of 376 per cent. Similarly, the use of cell phones is higher in the Commonwealth and has increased at a faster pace relative to the rest of the world. They agreed that this demonstrates the tremendous and growing potential for applying technology to providing health solutions in the Commonwealth.

Ministers noted that e-health will require organizational change and the need to ensure that health professionals are involved at all stages in e-health's development.

The Ministers acknowledged the benefits of e-health to public health, and noted the achievements in this area in all member states despite diverse levels of technological development. Whilst acknowledging the challenges, the Ministers noted e-health's potential in facilitating wider social and economic development, including through synergies from the use of technology, and urged the media to support these efforts by providing accurate information and helping to raise public awareness.

The Ministers welcomed the health work plan being pursued by the Secretariat, approved the actions taken and commended the results achieved. They acknowledged that the work plan to achieve the targets defined by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) should continue to provide the framework for coordinated and integrated action.

Ministers requested the Commonwealth Secretariat, bearing in mind its ongoing mandates and

importance of coherence with other international efforts, to pursue:

- High-level policy dialogues involving the health and information technology sectors, the private sector, health professionals and civil society on the opportunities and challenges of e-health and requested the Secretariat to facilitate this.
- Explore setting up e-health pilot projects in all regions of the Commonwealth.
- Public-private partnerships in e-health.
- Sharing of expertise and technical assistance between Commonwealth countries, both North-South and South-South.
- Leveraging additional resources to support the further development of its work on e-health and development.

Ministers agreed on 'Health and Climate Change' as the theme for CHMM 2009.

Commonwealth Secretariat
Geneva
18 May 2008