

COMMONWEALTH HEALTH MINISTERS MEETING
Geneva, 17 May 2009
MESSAGE TO COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT

Commonwealth Ministers of Health held their annual meeting on 17 May 2009 in Geneva, Switzerland, on the eve of the 62nd World Health Assembly. They took as their theme 'Health and Climate Change' in response to member states requests made in 2008, and in implementation of the Lake Victoria Commonwealth Climate Change Action Plan of 2007. The Action Plan calls for the use of Commonwealth networks to strengthen the consideration of the human and economic aspects of climate change.

The meeting was chaired by Senator the Hon. Jan McLucas, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Ageing in Australia. It was attended by 43 Commonwealth member countries and by partners representing bilateral and multilateral organisations and national and regional civil society organisations.

Ministers congratulated the Commonwealth Secretariat on the progress it had made in meeting the targets for work on e-health set at the 2008 Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting (CHMM).

Ministers thanked the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Health for its report outlining work of the Health Section on the health-related Millennium Development Goals, health workforce issues and progress made in e-health.

Ministers asked the Secretariat to continue to provide regular updates on its work, to allow for continued oversight of its health portfolio. Ministers noted the wide range of health issues addressed by the Secretariat. They supported efforts to focus the programme, within the context of the comparative advantages, resource base, capacity of the Commonwealth Secretariat, and through working with partners.

Ministers noted with concern that the current global economic crisis was threatening existing health gains, because of its impact on public and household expenditures. They feared that the crisis could exacerbate poverty and lead to reductions in health investment, and as such fail to recognise the important contribution of health to development. The crisis had heightened the need for a more efficient and effective use of resources and the need for an enhanced use of evidence to inform policy and resource allocation.

Ministers expressed their concern that unless increased resources were made available to secure and sustain health and overall social sector gains, the Millennium Development Goals would not be achieved and the progress made over the last decade could be lost.

Ministers agreed that there is a continuing health human resource crisis and that health human resourcing should continue to be a priority issue for consideration.

Similarly, Ministers noted the increasing morbidity and mortality, related to Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), and agreed to continue to engage their Heads of State on this issue.

Ministers acknowledged that expert scientific evidence confirms that human activity is altering the earth's climate. They identified the serious threats this presents to the health and well being of Commonwealth peoples. These include flooding, drought and other extreme weather events; altered ecological processes which are causing changes in infectious disease patterns and impaired food yields; conflict arising out of the depletion of basic resources such as water, fertile land and fisheries; and population displacements. They noted with concern that the poorest people, and those in the most geographically vulnerable regions, including small island states, were at greatest risk. They were aware that those risks would increase over time, and afflict future generations.

Ministers noted that some actions to reduce greenhouse gases will have a positive effect on human health, including the prevention of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), through improved air quality, diet and physical activity.

Ministers took careful note of the view of Dr Margaret Chan, Director General of the World Health Organization who stressed that climate change presents the greatest threat to public health of the 21st century. Ministers acknowledged the seriousness of the threat and further supported Dr Chan's call to strengthen health systems through the primary health care approach and to bring public health security to the community level.

Dr Chan also provided an update on the status of the current Influenza A(H1N1) outbreak. Ministers agreed that in light of the global context, there was a heightened need to strengthen health systems and to implement the International Health Regulations (2005).

With regards to climate change, Ministers recognised the benefits for both health and climate change of actions to:

1. Ensure multi-sectoral action across government and civil society and to engage communities in positive responses.
2. Develop and implement pragmatic, coordinated and evidence-based policies, strategies and adaptation plans.
3. Ensure leadership by the health sector in reducing its own carbon footprint.
4. Make progress in a fully integrated way across three linked agendas of health equity, poverty reduction and climate stabilisation.

Commonwealth Heads of Government, meeting in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago in November 2009, are urged to:

1. Use the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference in December 2009 to forge strong post-2012 International Climate Change arrangements that will support the smallest, poorest and most vulnerable regions, including small island

- states, and underpin effective mitigation and adaptation to reduce the potential health impacts of climate change on health and development.
2. Support the leadership role of Health Ministers and other relevant Ministers in conducting robust assessments of climate change health risks, to enable countries to prepare adaptation strategies.
 3. Meet new and existing funding commitments to support the development, implementation and monitoring of health and climate change adaptation plans.
 4. Support health system strengthening and increase funding for health emergency preparedness systems as a means of reducing the economic and social costs of expected long term crises, as well as pandemic outbreaks.
 5. Ensure that health sector concerns are given greater consideration in the planning and implementation of national and regional climate change responses.