

# ***Opening Remarks***

***By***  
***Dr Samlee Plianbangchang***  
***Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia***

***At***

***Regional Meeting on the Use of Herbal Medicines in***  
***Primary Health Care***

***Yangon,***  
***Myanmar***

**10-12 March 2009**

# **Regional Meeting on the Use of Herbal Medicines in Primary Health Care**

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Dr U Ko Ko, Honourable Regional Director Emeritus; Dr Tin  
Nyunt, Director-General, Department of Traditional Medicine, Myanmar;  
Honourable guests; Distinguished participants; Ladies and gentlemen:

It is my pleasure to warmly welcome you to this Regional Meeting  
on “the Use of Herbal Medicines in Primary Health Care”. First of all, I  
would like to thank the Myanmar Ministry of Health, especially the  
Department of Traditional Medicine, for hosting the meeting. I also  
thank the honourable guests and distinguished participants for sparing  
their valuable time to attend this meeting.

Ladies and gentlemen;

In light of a wide gap between “haves” and “have-nots” in health  
and with the rapid increase in the cost of medical treatment worldwide,  
the theme of this meeting is timely and relevant indeed. This is  
particularly so for countries in the South-East Asia Region.

It is an opportune time for us to think of returning to our natural resources for health care. These are especially traditional medicines, and herbal medicines in particular.

Traditional systems of medicines, including herbal medicines, have been used for several centuries for health care by people in Asia, as well as in other parts of the world. Traditional medicine continues to be a valuable source of remedies that have been used by millions of people around the world to secure their health. As we know, traditional systems of medicine have been developed from empirical experiences and from observations by people who use them. It embodies age-old wisdom, and forms an integral part of the social and cultural heritage of peoples and countries. The system has been inherited and handed down from one generation to the next.

Therefore, to a large extent, traditional systems of medicine, including herbal medicines, are country- and locality-specific. These systems have long been a part of life of people in communities, especially in rural areas.

Herbal medicines are widely used by people as a primary source for their health care. Today, herbal medicines are embraced not only by people of the country where they originated but by people of other countries as well. The traditional systems of medicine that have been practiced in countries of SEA Region contain herbal remedies that can protect and promote health. These medicines can be used to cure common ailments of people, and are especially useful in rural communities.

Distinguished participants;

It is important to draw a line distinguishing between traditional medicines and modern medicines. The domain of traditional medicines comprises preparations from parts of herbal plants, such as bark, leaves, roots, flowers, and so on. It involves direct use of parts of the herbal plants for medical purposes. Once the active ingredient is isolated from the herbal and natural raw materials and purified into chemical forms, we enter the domain of modern medicines.

Modern medicines are developed from scientific discovery and research. In the case of traditional medicines, the active ingredients of most herbal raw materials are still not known.

In this meeting, our attention is confined within the domain of traditional medicines, and our emphasis is on promotion of the use of herbal remedies in primary health care.

Isolation of active ingredients to find chemical forms of “modern” medicines has to go through the process of research and development, which requires capital investment and is time-consuming.

As we know, herbal medicines that are prepared by traditional methods are cheap. They are mainly used by people in rural areas. But when the preparation of these medicines is done through “modern methods”, they become expensive. Modernization of production of herbal medicines can lead to the increased cost of medicines. Since the 1990s, there has been a resurgence in the use of herbal products. It is likely that this trend will continue in future as well, for a number of reasons. I shall mention three of them. First, there is a desire of people to return to nature and to use natural products for taking care of their own health. Second, there is a perception that herbal medicines that are derived from natural raw materials, are relatively safe. Third, herbal medicines that are almost always available, and they are affordable in their traditional dosage forms, especially in rural areas.

WHO promotes the use of traditional medicines in primary health care, particularly the use of herbal products. As part of this promotion, WHO helps assure the quality, efficacy and safety of herbal remedies, as well as the availability of herbal plants, in the community.

This meeting aims to promote sharing of information and experiences among institutions of countries in the Region on the use of herbal medicines in PHC. The meeting is meant to initiate the networking of interested groups that can lead to inter-institutional and intercountry cooperation.

Ladies and gentlemen;

During recent years, there have been a number of important developments in the area of traditional and herbal medicines. In 2007, a WHO Interregional Workshop on the Use of Traditional Medicine in Primary Health Care was held in Mongolia. In 2008, a WHO Congress on traditional medicine was held in Beijing. In January this year, the WHO Executive Board passed a resolution on traditional medicine, which will be discussed at the forthcoming World Health Assembly. All these developments put emphasis on promotion of the use of traditional medicines in primary health care. These efforts all aim to promote inter-institutional, intercountry and interagency coordination and cooperation in the area of traditional medicines

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