



Address by

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to the

**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON “SOLUTIONS FOR A BETTER LIFE:
WORLD FUTURE LEADERS”**

Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, 21 February 2016

Your Highness Sheikh Dr Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qasimi,
Your Excellency Mr Abdul Rahman Bin Mohamad Al-Owais, Minister of Health,
Your Excellency Professor Hamid Al Naimi, Chancellor of the University of Sharjah,
Distinguished Colleagues,

It is a great pleasure to be here today. Let me congratulate Your Highness, as President of the University of Sharjah, on the theme of this conference “Solutions for a better life”. Few themes could be more important to the World Health Organization, which seeks to improve the health status of the citizens of the world. I know that you, like us in WHO, are committed to promoting health. Your efforts in tobacco control, in ensuring Sharjah is a healthy city and in promoting healthy lifestyles are a model for the Region.

I am pleased that WHO is cooperating with the University of Sharjah in this meeting. Through its collaborating centres, WHO supports vital research work, while also maintaining a finger on the pulse of innovation. The exchange of information and expertise between WHO, research institutes and other seats of learning is essential to our global health security and to health development in general.

Since 2012, WHO in the Region has pursued five strategic priorities in order to address the biggest health challenges facing our region: health systems strengthening towards universal health coverage; maternal and child health; prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases; health security and control of communicable diseases; and emergency preparedness and response. Health promotion, which is the main topic of this conference, is an integral part of these five priorities. We cannot achieve our goals in these priorities without effective national and local programmes in health protection and promotion of healthy lifestyles.

Traditionally, many health professionals have been trained to think about health care institutions, including hospitals and health centres, as the main approach to address health problems in

society. Now we see the cost of medical care spiralling upwards, and the burden of that cost, in many countries, is falling increasingly on those who can least afford it – the poor and the vulnerable. It is very clear then that the health system must also think about promoting health, about preventing disease and enabling communities to adopt healthy lifestyles. Moreover, preventing many of these problems is more effective than curing them.

Effective disease prevention is dependent on promoting health and addressing environmental and behavioural factors that may adversely affect health. This applies equally to infectious diseases and to noncommunicable diseases. We have tended to think that infectious diseases are a thing of the past, but in the past few years, the countries of the region have seen numerous outbreaks which have required standard public health responses as well as public information responses. Prime examples of this are the H5N1 global influenza outbreak and, more recently, the outbreak of Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV). Outbreaks such as these have exposed gaps in our health systems and in our interactions with the public. Lessons were learned in our efforts to prevent importation of the Ebola virus last year and, more recently, of the Zika virus. In all these examples, health promotion is a key component of preparedness and response.

Meanwhile, as most communicable diseases have largely come under control in the Region, noncommunicable diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer, have become increasingly important and now account for the majority of illness and death in many countries in our region. Noncommunicable diseases are chronic in nature. The more we can do to promote health and encourage healthy living, the more we can prevent these diseases and the longer we can keep people from complications and premature death. This means we must engage with the community and with other sectors.

The three most important risk factors in the Region for the four major noncommunicable diseases – cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes and chronic respiratory disease – are lack of physical activity, tobacco use and unhealthy diet. A third of men and half of women in the Region undertake less than the recommended minimum levels of physical activity in the Region. According to WHO data, this region is among the regions with lower levels of physical activity, and highest global levels, in some countries, of tobacco use, obesity and overweight among adolescents and adults. If we are to be serious about health promotion, health professionals must work as a body with governments and local communities, to encourage physical activity, to discourage tobacco use in all its forms, and to explain what healthy eating really means in language that people can understand.

There is no doubt that no major difference will be made in promoting healthy lifestyles without the full and effective engagement of non-health sectors in addressing risk factors. The social determinants of health must be addressed in order to promote health. These determinants include safe drinking-water, proper sanitation, clean air, safe built environments and adequate housing and flour fortification. Therefore, we all – health professionals, universities and policy-makers –

need to interact even more with other sectors – finance, transport, town planning, trade, industry, sport, to name just a few. And now that so many of the health issues that face us are global in nature, the health sector even needs to engage with the foreign affairs sector, to ensure that the diplomats who engage in global diplomacy are fully apprised of the health issues involved at all levels.

Your Highness, Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This conference is aimed at encouraging leadership in promoting solutions for a better life. I hope I have highlighted some of the key issues that future health leaders need to consider. Innovative thinking that targets not just the challenges in the region, but that also considers local context and proposes local solutions is essential.

I look forward to the future collaboration between WHO and the University of Sharjah. This meeting marks the beginning of a concrete partnership that will aim to strengthen the movement for better health in the Region.

Thank you again for inviting me to be here today. I wish you all success.