

**Remarks by Dr. Zhu CHEN, the Chinese Health Minister**  
**at**  
**The Opening Ceremony of the ECOSOC AMR**  
**Regional Ministerial Meeting on Promoting Health Literacy**  
**(9:30 am, April 29, 2009, Beijing)**

Honorable Under Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr. Sha Zukang,  
President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, Ms. Lucas  
Assistant Director-General of World Health Organization, Mr. Alwan,  
Distinguished ministers, delegates, ladies and gentlemen:

Good morning!

I am very pleased to attend the opening ceremony of the ECOSOC Annual Ministerial Review Regional Ministerial Meeting on Promoting Health Literacy. On behalf of the Chinese Ministry of Health, I'd like to congratulate the convening of the meeting, and extend warm welcome to all the delegates from Ministries of Health of various states, relevant United Nations agencies, academic institutions both at home and abroad as well as representatives of non-governmental organizations who come all the way to the meeting.

The United Nations Economic and Social Council has set the theme of this meeting as "Promoting Health Literacy", which I strongly believe is a very good one and I highly appreciate the unswerving and tireless efforts made by the United Nations Economic and Social Council to promote the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. As we all know, the United Nations Millennium Summit established the Millennium Development Goals, three of which are directly related to health and universal access to health knowledge is essential for achieving these three goals. A study on reducing infant and young children mortality conducted by the World Health Organization indicated that each year, 1.7 million people die from diarrheal diseases all over the world, and diarrhea is a major cause of death in infants, about 94% of diarrhea deaths can be prevented through the cultivation of good health habits. If people can avail themselves of common health knowledge as simple as washing hands frequently, they can effectively prevent the occurrence of diarrhea. The British philosopher Francis Bacon once said "knowledge is power". In the same token, there is an old saying in Chinese that "Give a man a fish; you have fed him for one day. Teach a man to fish, and you have fed him for a lifetime." These well-known proverbs demonstrate that knowledge has played an essential role in the development of

mankind. In the health sector, health literacy is our best weapon and the most effective vaccine against diseases, which helps greatly in preventing diseases. Only when people become health literates can they avoid harms in a scientific way when threatened by diseases and take the initiative to seek health services to effectively protect themselves.

The Chinese Ministry of Health attaches great importance to health literacy. In 2008, we issued "Health Literacy for Chinese Citizens - basic knowledge and skills", and published "66 Articles of Health – Readings of Health Literacy for Chinese Citizens," in which the basic health knowledge and skills Chinese citizens should have are presented in detail. By organizing various activities like seminars and distributing brochures, we have made our efforts to promote health literacy, change the unhealthy life style and advocate the concept of healthy life to improve the health of our people.

The convocation of this meeting is in coincidence with the new wave of comprehensive medical and health care reform in China. From this year to 2011, the Chinese government will focus on the following five aspects to promote the health reform: First, to build a basic medical insurance scheme that has extensive coverage, ensures the basic needs and is sustainable, incorporating all the urban and rural residents into the scheme. Second, to establish a national list of essential drugs so as to reduce the cost burden on our people and satisfy their needs of essential drugs. Third, to improve health care at the grassroots level and offer convenient access to healthcare to the people. Fourth, to gradually promote equity in basic public health services and implement major public health projects so as to maximize our efforts in disease prevention. Fifth, to promote the reform of public hospitals to improve medical and health service quality. The main purpose of the reform is to establish a basic healthcare system covering all urban and rural residents and offer our people healthcare services that are safe, effective, convenient and affordable. Promoting health literacy is one of the key elements of our medical and health care reform as the health standard would not be improved until our people's health literacy is cultivated.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

There are only 6 years left for us to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, and a number of countries and regions have seen slow progress in health indicators at the global level. It is estimated that if the current pace of development persists, child mortality and maternal mortality rate can not achieve the desired objectives. There is an urgent need to convey health knowledge to the public in an effort to promote the realization of the Millennium Development Goals. To this end, I propose the following recommendations:

First, support for developing countries to health literacy promotion should be offered in order to achieve the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. At present, the economic crisis is sweeping the globe and we've seen the rise of trade protectionism. Though the crisis has affected many countries, it cannot and will not

interrupt the process of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Continuing efforts to promote this process will be conducive to the recovery of world economic growth. The international community should pay great attention to the damages in developing countries caused by the crisis and minimize them. Developed countries and international organizations should assume their due responsibility and obligations to continue aid programs, debt relief and other commitments, and effectively maintain or increase aid to developing countries with their support and assistance in the health sector in particular.

Second, the leadership role of the health authorities should be given full play in promoting health literacy. Health departments should develop applicable action plans for health literacy programs suited to their own state conditions and contribute to vigorous promotion of health literacy and universal access to health knowledge, so that health literacy can attract public attention and basic health knowledge and practices will be cultivated.

Third, the entire society should be mobilized to promote health literacy. The health sector must rely on the strength of the communities and mobilize multiple sectors and stakeholders to jointly promote health literacy, increase people's awareness of self-care and to improve people's health.

Fourth, international cooperation on health literacy should be strengthened. As diseases respect no borders, with the vulnerability and the interdependence among countries increased as a result of globalization, health security becomes a major challenge for all the nations, and stands at the core of the overall development strategies. Therefore, the international community should strengthen cooperation, help each other, share knowledge and join hands in defeating public health hazards which are threatening the health of mankind.

Like all governments in the world today, the Chinese government attaches great importance to and takes active measures against human infection of swine flu, the public health emergency of international concern. Apart from various measures like import and export inspection and quarantine, disease control and medical treatment, the health administration has a particularly important task to communicate relevant knowledge to the general public and improve their awareness and capacity of self-care. I am confident that by equipping our people with the scientific health knowledge, human infection of swine flu can be prevented, controlled and treated. Hence, it is of great significance that we have "promotion of health literacy" as the theme of the meeting.

Dear delegates, ladies and gentlemen, four-fifths of the world's population live in developing countries, and the Asia-Pacific region is home to a population of 3.8 billion, accounting for three-fifths of the world's population. We all enjoy the equal right of life and hence, the equal right of access to health literacy. If the great majority

of people in developing countries of the Asia-Pacific region cannot get access or do not have sufficient access to necessary health knowledge, that means we live in a world which is unfair, unhealthy, and bound to be inharmonious. I believe that as long as governments, international organizations, as well as the international community at large have a strong sense of responsibility and get united regardless of geographic locations and different races, we will be able to promote health literacy in the public and achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Then everyone can freely pursue happiness and mankind will live in harmony. I think this is not only my hope but also a common hope of everyone here today. Let's move quickly to fulfill the United Nations Millennium Declaration Goals and make our dream come true.

Finally, I wish the meeting a complete success!

Thank you!