

**World Health Day 2016: Let's beat diabetes – Remarks made by Dr Godfrey Xuereb
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Tomorrow, the 7th of April, The World Health Organization will celebrate its birthday – but this year the traditional birthday cake will be replaced by healthier options and with a call to action to tackle diabetes. World Health Day commemorates the day when WHO was first established in 1948. Each year a specific health theme is chosen to celebrate this day and this year we will focus on diabetes prevention and management.

Diabetes rates are on the rise everywhere, with 422 million adults globally affected. In Barbados we know that 14 in every 100 citizens is known to have diabetes, this is the 3rd highest rate in the Americas and follows St Kitts and Saint Lucia. We also know that for every known diabetic there is one that is living with the condition without knowing it. Although 14 out of a 100 might not look like a big number we know that the impact of diabetes is felt by individuals, families, communities and national economies. So it is far more than the 14 out of 100 that know they have diabetes who are really affected – we are all affected by diabetes. Yet much of its burden is avoidable.

There are globally four times more people with diabetes today than there were in 1980 and in Barbados, over the same period of time, the rates have more than doubled. Diabetes caused 1.5 million deaths globally and in Barbados 1 in every 10 persons died from diabetes with only cancers and cardiovascular diseases causing more deaths. This is the 4th highest in the Americas following Mexico, Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica.

But poorly controlled diabetes does not only kill at an early age, it is one of the main causes of disability and hospitalization that we currently face. Complications including heart attacks, strokes, kidney failure, blindness, and foot ulcers than can lead to amputations all lead to a deterioration of the quality of life. Leading to citizen not only being less productive, but requiring society to support them through a complicated maze of clinical problems.

So as we all celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Independence in Barbados we need to ensure that we all pitch in to tackle the problem of diabetes.

Why do I call on all of us ? I do this because diabetes is preventable and the preventative measures are not all found in the armory that the Ministry of Health has. Diabetes can be prevented by reducing overweight and obesity and we know that more than 7 out of every 10 Barbadian females are overweight and almost 6 out of 10 men have now joined them in this grouping. Barbados has the 4th highest rate in the Americas following the United States of America, Bahamas and Canada.

We all have a role to play in creating the enabling environment to facilitate healthy eating. Be it the food that we grow locally, or those that we import, be it the availability of healthy options in schools and at our workplaces, be it the cost of healthy and unhealthy foods we all have a role that we can play in assisting Barbados become a healthier nation. Here I have to congratulate the Government of Barbados for the bold decision last year to introduce a tax on high calorie carbonated drinks and want to continue my plea to make Barbados a trans-fat free island as this will rid us of another manufactured substance which has led to the deterioration of the quality of the national diet.

Many will say that diet alone will not solve the issue of diabetes prevention and I totally agree. We need to twin the dietary habits with physical activity. Four out of every 10 adults in Barbados are not doing enough physical activity. Again we all have a role to play in creating the enabling environment to facilitate increased physical activity in Barbados. I ask you, how many of our offices have facilities which enable our staff to be physically active before or after work; how many of us reach the 60 minutes per week recommended by WHO for all adults. We in the PAHO office are leading by example and have a healthy space within the office as well as shower facilities for staff to be more physically active.

We need to start from our children and ensure that they learn to love physical activity and make it part of their lifestyle. Again we at the PAHO office will be making our healthy space available for our family members as we “Walk the Talk”. Let us take the opportunity of the recent success of the West Indies Cricket Team and the upcoming successes that the Caribbean will have in Rio this summer to galvanize our youth and children into being more active. But we also need to create the enabling environments for them to do so. As

development partners we should look at the physical and mental wellbeing of the school children of Barbados; we should look at the physical development of the youth of this country as they will be the motor that will continue to generate the economic development of the nation. They will be the ones who the UN has seen to sustain development through the SDGs which have the goal to reduce premature mortality from non-communicable diseases by 30% by 2030.

People with diabetes can live long and healthy lives if their disease is detected and well-managed. The WHO's *Global report on diabetes*, released today, shows that governments around the world have begun to act, but much more concerted action is needed. Barbados needs to continue to ensure that access to essential medicines and technologies for diabetes remain available to all. This is one of the pillars of Universal Health Access and Universal Health Coverage. Barbados needs to continue leading the way in screening for complications and early treatment when they are found as well as patient education to promote healthy diet, physical activity and self-care.

We need a combination of fiscal policies, legislation, changes to the environment and raising awareness of the health risks but together I am convinced that we can halt the rise in diabetes and provide care to improve quality of life for those living with the disease. Everyone has a role to play and **"Together we Will Beat Diabetes"**.

Thank You.