



NCD Advocacy, Accountability, and Conflict of Interest Meeting
February 17-18th, 2017 Jolly Beach Resort & Spa, Antigua

Address by Hon. Molwyn Joseph, Minister of Health and the Environment

Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC) Workshop on Advocacy, Accountability, Conflict of Interest

Friday, February 17th, 18th, 2017

Protocols:

- **Hon. Dr. Karen Cummings, Minister in the Ministry of Public Health, Guyana**
- **Sir George Alleyne, Director Emeritus, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and Patron, Healthy Caribbean Coalition**
- **Sir Trevor Hassell, President/Chair, Healthy Caribbean Coalition/NCD Commission, Barbados**
- **Dr. Karen Sealey, Director, Healthy Caribbean Coalition/Trinidad and Tobago NCD Alliance and other HCC Directors**
- **Mrs. Maisha Hutton, Executive Director, Healthy Caribbean Coalition**
- **Mr. Reynold Hewitt, PAHO Country Programme Specialist**
- **Dr. James Hospedales, Executive Director, Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA)**
- **Dr. Rhonda Sealey-Thomas, Chief Medical Officer and Chief Medical officers from other territories**
- **Dr. Joycelyn Walters-Thomas, President, Antigua and Barbuda Medical Association**
- **Dr. Leslie Walwyn, Past President, Antigua and Barbuda Medical Association**

- **All other guests and workshop participants, especially those representing local civil society and business organisations.**

Good morning to all. I extend greetings to you from the Government of Antigua and Barbuda and more so from the Ministry of Health and the Environment. It is our great pleasure to welcome you to our country and to this essential workshop on the way forward on combating the plague of the 21st century, non-communicable diseases.

I recognise the presence of so many distinguished Caribbean personnel from the highest levels of our region's medical and academic professions.

Your attendance is indeed testimony to the significance to which you attribute this workshop, to the critical nature of and the urgency in confronting, managing and reducing non-communicable diseases in the Caribbean.

Commendations are in order for the Healthy Caribbean Coalition. We take special note of your mission statement:

"To harness the power of civil society, in collaboration with government, private enterprise, academia and international partners ... in the development and implementation of plans for the prevention and management of chronic diseases among Caribbean people."

In recent years, you have been in the vanguard of the effort to mobilise Caribbean society and to increase awareness to the dangers of chronic diseases among us.

And you do appreciate that in order to achieve your vision of *"the reduction of death and disability from chronic diseases among people in the Caribbean,"* – in order to attain real success - we need unity of purpose, among Caribbean governments, civil society alliances such as yours, the private sector, other non-governmental organisations, mass media and private individuals from every sector and profession in the region.

This must be a real, lasting and meaningful partnership. Teamwork wins! Teamwork always wins! And we are in a battle to save lives.

This is a battle we must not lose. The Caribbean cannot afford to lose this war against non-communicable diseases.

I use the word 'war' deliberately. I do not exaggerate. Non-communicable diseases are killers – the number one killer in the Caribbean. They destroy lives, they increase social and health costs, they undermine our labour force, resulting in loss of productivity. They retard our economic growth and national development. They are, to borrow a popular movie title, '*a clear and present danger,*' to our region.

Therefore, the issue of non-communicable diseases is no longer just a health or social issue, necessitating the intervention of only medical practitioners, social planners and Ministries of Health.

It has become an economic and national issue, - an economic and national challenge. More so in a region still struggling to recover from the worldwide 2008 economic recession, in a region, for the most part, lacking significant natural resources and which has repeatedly emphasised the importance of our human resources, our human capital, to economic development and nation building.

We need to protect this national resource...our human resource. So rich and enlightened a treasure, but a treasure that can be decimated, rendered disabled and worse, killed by heart attacks, strokes, cancer, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes.

Government ministries, government agencies at all levels, social planners, economic and national planners must now act in concert to arrest this scourge afflicting our region.

The Government of Antigua and Barbuda and in particular the Ministry of Health have been playing their part. In 2015, the Antigua and Barbuda Cabinet approved a National Policy and Action Plan for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases. A Wellness Committee has been established in the Ministry of Health for the implementation of the NCD National Policy and Action Plan.

I can report that the implementation of the Action Plan is currently in process. Moreover, in recent times, myself, the Chief Medical Officer and other members of the Ministry of Health and the Environment have utilised the national media to get the word out about the killer amongst us... and more crucially to attempt to persuade our population to make a change for the better, to put away the old and deadly habits of tobacco and alcohol use, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity, (the horsemen of death as one would put it) and to embrace a culture of life, a culture of healthy living.

We appreciate that at times persuasion needs a legislative jolt and that is why we have recently drafted a Tobacco Control Act which will soon be presented to Parliament. And in the coming months, we intend to draft and enact further legislation to tax sugary beverages.

My ministry has also formed alliances with a number of civil society organisations in the quest to reduce and manage NDCs. We are working with the Rotary Club of St. John's in diabetic foot care and breast cancer screening, The Renal Society with kidney disease, the Diabetes Association with diabetes prevention and management and the Rotary Sundowner Club in screening for diabetic retinopathy.

These groups are represented today at this workshop. We thank you and applaud your civic service.

In order to expand our partnerships and our advocacy, the Ministry of Health will shortly be establishing a multi-sectoral National Wellness Commission.

Still, I will be the first to concede that our mission to change old habits is no easy task. Even with the force of law alongside it. But at this moment in time, we must not be blindsided by negativity – we cannot afford to be. We must redouble our efforts. My government, all Caribbean governments must continue to form alliances with civil society.

That is why the work of The Healthy Caribbean Coalition is so impressive and instructive. In a few short years, this coalition has formed an alliance of *'non-governmental health organisations, professional health and other associations, faith-based organisations,*

neighbourhood organisations, cooperatives, charities, unions, social movements and special interest groups.' An impressive list!

Today, this workshop is aptly titled, '**Advocacy, Accountability, Conflict of Interest.**' It is clearly time to reflect and to ponder new ideas of advocacy and capacity building. How can we increase our effectiveness in mobilisation, in increasing awareness? How can we make proficient use of the information communication technologies of today, of social media, the internet, of smart phones, of instant messaging?

How do we reach the most vulnerable in society? How do we reach our young people?

How best do we empower our growing partnership, our increasing alliance with the tools to reach out to our people, - to inform, to educate, to persuade.

Obviously, in order to implement new advocacy strategies and techniques, it is vital to examine the past years and the past and current methods, to ascertain what has worked and what has not.

We are aware of the daunting challenge before us. That is why we are here today. Consider for a moment these facts on non-communicable diseases put out by the World Health Organisation (WHO):

- NCDs are by far the leading cause of death in the world – 63 percent of all annual deaths, killing more than 36 million people each year.
- Some 80 percent of all NCD deaths occur in low and middle – income countries.
- NCDs affect women and men almost equally around the world.
- NCDs are largely preventable – by effective intervention that tackles shared risk factors, namely tobacco use, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and harmful use of alcohol.
- NCDs are not only a health problem but a developmental challenge as well – NCDs force many people into, or entrench them in poverty due to catastrophic expenditures for treatment; they also undercut productivity.

- 1.5 billion adults, 20 years and older were overweight by 2008; nearly 43 million children under 5 years old were overweight in 2010.
- Tobacco use kills 6 million people a year. By 2020, this number will increase to 7.5 million, accounting for 10 percent of all deaths.

Statistics for our Caribbean region are more alarming! According to an article in the **Caribbean Knowledge Series**, entitled '*Non-Communicable Diseases in the Caribbean: The New Challenges for Productivity and Growth*,' prepared by Mr. Clark Matthew, "*NCDs are linked to more than 7 out of 10 deaths in the Caribbean region, which exceeds the global average of nearly 60 percent. In contrast, the occurrences of deaths as a result of communicable diseases are on average 8 to 15 percent in the region.*"

Take a breather and consider those figures again. **In Antigua and Barbuda, it is estimated that non-communicable diseases account for more than 85 percent of all deaths.**

Consider also these regional statistics from **Dr. Shiyao Chao of the World Bank**, in a paper titled '*Economic Impact of NCDs in the Caribbean*,' addressing the Caribbean Health Financing Conference in Jamaica, November 12th to 14th, 2013.

- NCD deaths are 5 times that of deaths from other diseases.
- NCD deaths are 10 times that of deaths from HIV/Aids
- NCDs account for 65 percent of the burden of diseases.

Dr. Chao concludes, "*NCDs are the No 1 killer in the Americas. Approximately 250 million people live with an NCD in the Americas.*"

Is there any doubt that non-communicable disease, be they heart attacks, strokes, cancer, respiratory diseases such as asthma and diabetes are killers and that we are indeed in a war for survival?

Is there any more doubt as to the severe economic and social costs to our public health systems, our national economies, to households and individuals?

Someone once told me...'*Don't give me problems, give me solutions.*' The World Health Organisation states that *"eliminating major risks would prevent most non-communicable diseases. If major risk factors for NCDs were eliminated, at least 75 percent of heart diseases, strokes and type 2 diabetes and 40 percent of cancer would be prevented."*

We in this room are aware of the magnitude and gravity of the problem. There are millions outside of this room who may not be aware, but only become aware when they are struck down by this pestilence. Our function in this workshop is to discover solutions, to come up with the best possible strategies and tools to manage and reduce the spread of non-communicable diseases in the Caribbean.

And I cannot stress this point enough. The key to winning is to reach out to our respective populations...to inform and to persuade them to alter their living, dietary, consumption habits. Basically, we want them to change their lifestyles. Or else they will die, at a much faster rate, at a much younger age. And that puts us all in an untenable position. Individuals perish, families suffer, and economic growth and national development cannot be sustained. We need to be blunt in our assessments and in our advocacy for a fundamental change in our cultural lifestyle.

Non-communicable diseases are not inevitable. They do not have to be a death sentence imposed upon our population. **They can be prevented!**

A further goal of this workshop must be to increase alliances and partnerships. I appreciate the need to reach out to the private sector, to co-opt them into participating in the advocacy to change lifestyles and save lives. Yes, in some instances there will be perceived conflict of interests and strategies must be created and implemented to manage this. For example, how do we convince the owners of our fast food chains and soda beverage plants to join the alliance and advocate for a healthier diet? Can we mandate a total ban on the sale of sugar-laced sodas in our schools and persuade the manufacturers and exporters that it is in their financial interest to innovate and introduce to the market new products, healthier products? Our scientists and farmers clearly have a role to play in this expanding partnership.

To succeed in our goals and objectives, our advocacy must be bold and creative. It must be consistent and relentless. I know sometimes, one might equate this pursuit to change peoples' cultural habits to pulling teeth. After all, one only needs to look at the long lines of our fast food restaurants, daily... even on Sundays, to appreciate the task at hand. But it is a task that we must engage and one that we must win.

Look at it this way. Lifestyles and cultural norms evolve and change throughout decades and generations. My generation had different values in the decades of yesteryear. We ate healthier and we were more active and non-communicable diseases were not as prevalent. External influences brought about profound changes in our lifestyles and norms. By our sustained efforts and as a result of the work that we will put in at this workshop, we can ensure yet another change in our lives. The brilliant minds assembled here today strongly suggest to me that ...we can do this.

The Ministry of Health and the Environment and the Government of Antigua and Barbuda pledge continued support in the fight against non-communicable diseases. We wish you success in your deliberations today and tomorrow. Let all ideas contend and leave no stone unturned as you introduce new methods, tools and strategies in the continuing and expanding war against non-communicable diseases in the Caribbean.

It is with a profound optimism for the future, for our enduring partnership and for the realisation of your vision, goals and objectives that I declare open the Healthy Caribbean Coalition Workshop on Advocacy, Accountability and Conflict of Interest.

May God Guide us All