

**KEYNOTE SPEECH OF
PRESIDENT GLORIA MACAPAGAL ARROYO
To be Read by
DOH SEC. FRANCISCO DUQUE III
13th ASEAN FEDERATION OF ENDOCRINE SOCIETIES
Philippine Plaza Hotel, Pasay City
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Her Excellency, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, regrets that she is unable to be with us today because of some other pressing commitments. Along with her greetings, I bring with me her personal wishes for the success of this conference. I shall now proceed to read Her Excellency's message, as follows:

A warm welcome to all the foreign delegates of the 13th ASEAN Federation of Endocrine Societies.

I congratulate the Philippine Society of Endocrinology and Metabolism (PSEM) for its third hosting of this scientific conference.

This is a good time for ASEAN's medical societies to converge and share experiences in combating diseases. The world is watching us while our countries strive to prevent the spread of avian flu and other new diseases even as we individually control the occurrence of the most common diseases of our countries.

Endocrine diseases, unlike avian flu or SARS, have been thoroughly studied for some time. Yet the deaths attributed to these chronic diseases continue to climb annually. Worldwide, diabetes, obesity, stroke and heart diseases remain top causes of deaths. Just this year, 35 million people throughout the globe are likely to die from non-communicable diseases or NCDs.

The same trends are showing in Asia where poverty compounds the incidence of these diseases. Our health professionals are kept on their toes grappling with NCDs and their slow and painful complications. In the most extreme settings, almost 50% of deaths are attributable to these silent killers.

This situation is not much different here in the Philippines where we have to contend with non-communicable diseases and newly emerging communicable diseases in relation to the poverty of our people. Six out of the ten most potent killers here are NCDs, topped by cardiovascular diseases. Given this trend, the Philippines may rank 9th globally in 2030 in the incidence of diabetes. A great number of Filipinos continue to suffer from some kind of micronutrient deficiency, particularly iodine deficiency, which we have tried to address through our food fortification program. On the other end of the spectrum, we will likely have to deal with obesity too as the number of Filipinos who adopt a more sedentary lifestyle increases.

It is necessary for the health sector of all ASEAN nations to move in concert to prevent more deaths due to NCDs. Any inaction will be serious and costly. The direct economic costs of managing these diseases and dealing with their prolonged complications are already catastrophic, especially for the poorer countries. As the World Health Organization says, NCDs are "an under-appreciated cause of poverty and a hindrance to economic development."

Most of ASEAN's countries have a high incidence of poverty, so many of us are familiar with the interrelated problems of disease and poverty. Most of the poor receive basic health care in trickles. Many of them have little or no access to specialized care to manage disease complications brought about by bad health choices. The cost of medicines is often beyond their reach. Often, they have to make the grim choice between spending for food and other necessities or spending for medicine, and almost always, the former prevails.

Without doubt, poverty is the single biggest cause of increasing the incidence of diseases just as disease also causes poverty. This is a tragic cycle that can be broken with finality only

when every ASEAN country shall have conquered poverty. While each ASEAN country endeavors to improve its own and the Region's economies, the various sectors can work together to find solutions that will be beneficial to us all. The progress in ASEAN's researches will have an impact on the wellbeing of the Region's population as well as on the Regional economy.

Medical science has already found an effective means to save millions of people from unnecessary deaths. Several countries have shown that low-cost interventions like proactive lifestyle changes and disease prevention can avert premature deaths. As part of the UN's Millennium Development Goals, the WHO has called for a global reduction in NCD-caused death rates by 2% per year or around 40 million people annually worldwide, for the next ten years. We in ASEAN can do something to save more lives in our own countries if we combine forces, share our expertise and increase our commitment to promote healthy lifestyle choices.

In the Philippines, the Department of Health is pushing for reforms that will help us cope with the rapidly increasing burdens of NCDs. In the past fifteen years alone, we have had over twenty laws to increase the delivery of public health services and decrease the cost of commonly used medicines. Among our most important health programs are the fortification of basic food like salt and the promotion of breastfeeding to ensure the health of infants. We have succeeded in giving broader health insurance coverage to our poorest citizens under our universal health insurance program. To make medicine more accessible to the poor, we have complemented our law on generic drugs with affordable imported or locally made generics distributed by DOH-run pharmacies in remote areas.

Our Department of Health has joined efforts with 41 other stakeholders from the Non-Government Organizations, professional societies, medical associations, the academe and other government agencies. The Philippine Coalition for the prevention and Control of Non-Communicable Diseases is now tasked to implement an integrated and holistic approach in the primary prevention of chronic diseases. The Coalition is now encouraging fast food centers to offer healthier food choices under our Action for Life advocacy. We also hope to replicate an unprecedented feat in 2003 when the DOH gathered together 40,000 Filipinos to participate collectively in a mass aerobic activity.

The overall goal of our public health sector is to improve access to and equity of quality health services with a definite bias for the poorest of our people. We aim to let our people make healthy choices more easily. The key words are 'healthy choices' and the basic strategy is to empower people so these choices are readily available to them. We are determined to continue making a difference for healthy choices.

We in ASEAN are bound together economically, culturally and strategically. Likewise, we are connected by an ASEAN spirit that drives cooperation and mutual understanding directed at promoting economic growth, global peace and social stability through our region. The collaboration and free exchange of ideas among the peoples of ASEAN will bring us to these common dreams.

I invite all the delegates here to remain focused on the noble goal of saving more lives as you discuss in this gathering your best practices and strategies in fighting NCDs.

May you have a most fruitful conference and a pleasant stay in the Philippines. Mabuhay!

Thus ends the President's message. May I also add my own wishes for a very fruitful discussion and an advanced Merry Christmas to all!