

President's Message



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Forty years ago, the World Health Organization (WHO), organised the International Conference on Primary Health Care in Alma-Ata (now known as Almaty), in the former Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (now known as Kazakhstan), 6-12 September 1978. The well-known Declaration of Alma-Ata, termed Health For All, was adopted during this conference. As the first international conference of its kind, the Declaration expressed the urgent need by all governments, health care providers and community to work together to protect and promote health for all. The Declaration has been accepted by all member countries of WHO and became a major milestone of the 20th century for public health.

The Alma-Ata Declaration reaffirmed the definition by WHO of health as a "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". This definition holds good to this day. The Declaration further expressed the need to close the inequality gap in the health status between the developed and developing countries and enunciated the role of the state, called for economic and social development as pre-requisite to the attainment of health for all. Health and health promotion by individuals and groups was declared a human right.

Primary health care was to be incorporated in the health systems of the member countries as the driver for attaining health for all.

Forty years on, the Conference returned to Kazakhstan for the 40th year celebration of the Declaration of Alma-Ata to review the progress since 1978 and with a new tagline, "From Alma-Ata towards universal health coverage and the Sustainable Development Goal".

Global Conference on Primary Health Care, Astana, Kazakhstan 25-26 October 2018

The WHO, UNICEF and the Government of Kazakhstan co-hosted the Conference in the new gleaming capital city of Kazakhstan, Astana. Malaysian Medical Association was privileged to have been invited to participate in the



Panelists at the launch



Dr Sharman (left) the brains behind the Declaration of Alma-Ata



Datuk Dr Noor Hisham with his presentation

celebration and the Conference. The two day conference was attended by over 2000 participants from around the globe and represented by a wide array of people involved in health care including the ministers of health, finance, education, health workers, non-governmental organisations, academia, youth delegates, medical students, philanthropy, patient advocates, media and the private sector. The Malaysian Ministry of Health was represented by the Director General of Health, Datuk Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah.

A significant feature during the Conference was the recognition given to the youth delegates and the medical students who were given the torch to bear as the future implementers of the principles of the Declaration of Astana, 2018 which was presented to them.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in his speech at the Conference, "Today, instead of health for all, we have health for some. We all have a solemn responsibility to ensure that today's declaration on primary health care enables every person, everywhere to exercise their

fundamental right to health.” In the four decades after the Declaration of Alma-Ata, where the foundation for primary health care was laid, the progress has been uneven and nearly half the world’s population lacks access to basic and essential health care for communicable and non-communicable diseases, mental health, maternal and child health, and sexual and reproductive health. This was a sombre reflection and tacit acknowledgment of the failure to achieve what was declared four decades earlier. Certainly, a new commitment was needed by all involved in healthcare, especially the state players.

Declaration of Astana, 2018

The new Declaration of Astana, 2018 was adopted during the Global Conference on Primary Health Care on 25 October 2018.

The Declaration affirmed the commitment to the fundamental right of every human being to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health without distinction of any kind. It once again reiterated the importance of primary health care as the cornerstone of



With Ms Batool Ahmad Al Wahdani,
President of the International Federation
of Medical Students

With Datuk Dr Noor Hisham and
Dr Peter Crowley, Acting Director,
Division of Health Systems
Coordination, Health Policy and
Financing of WHO



Indian Minister of Health
Mr Jagat Pragash Nadda,
addressing the Conference.
India will roll out their social
health insurance covering
nearly 500 million people
of India

“Although the world is a healthier place for children today than ever before, close to 6 million children die every year before their fifth birthday mostly from preventable causes, and more than 150 million are stunted. We as a global community can change that, by bringing quality health services close to those who need them. That’s what primary health care is about.”

(Henrietta Fore, UNICEF Executive Director)

The admission of failure to achieve the principles of Declaration of Alma-Ata called for a new vision and strategy if UN’s Sustainable Development Goal No 3, which proclaims that ensuring healthy lives and promoting the well-being at all ages is essential to sustainable development, is to be attained. It further emphasises that primary health care is the most inclusive, effective and efficient approach to enhance peoples’ physical, mental and social well-being and is the driving force behind a sustainable health system. Health, it further states, is not only a matter of social justice but a vital necessity for “peace, security, and socio-economic development.”

a sustainable health system for universal health coverage. It further requires the promotion of preventative, curative, and rehabilitative services, palliative care, protecting people from poverty caused by disproportionate out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure, acting on addressing the shortage and uneven distribution of health workers, and to also to act on reducing the cost of health care and to reduce wastage.

The Declaration of Astana was unanimously endorsed by all WHO Member States. The Declaration focussed on four key areas which the Member States pledged to concentrate on:

- (1) making bold political choices for health across all sectors
- (2) building sustainable primary health care
- (3) empowering individuals and communities
- (4) aligning stakeholder support to national strategies and plans

In reviewing the Declaration of Astana, Martin Gorsky, Professor in the History of Public Health at the London

School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine wrote,

"On the one hand then, history inspires, with its recall of past efforts to make universal health coverage a reality. The world is much better placed than in 1978 in thinking systematically about the 'building blocks' of a primary health system, while studies like the Global Burden of Disease give us better tools to plan programmes of essential services. Also, unlike in 1978, we know much more about how insurance or NHS-style financing systems can be organised, and have a more realistic understanding of the part the private sector can play. Yet history also emphasises the scale of the challenge before us, for strong leadership, both in national governments and in respected global organisations, will be crucial. Here in Britain, it is hard to maintain optimism in the face of rising nationalistic politics, and of populist calls to curb foreign aid budgets. We need to keep in mind the founding principle of the UN and its agencies, that achieving global peace hinges on furthering social justice."

Scan the QR code for the full text of the Declaration of Astana (also available on the MMA website).



Implications of the Declaration of Astana for Malaysia

Some of the principles in the Declaration are already being addressed in Malaysia. However, more needs to be done. MMA has been calling on the Ministry of Health to be inclusive in engaging the private general practitioners to enhance the delivery of the primary health care in a more concerted and uniform manner. While the current system of healthcare is dichotomous, there is an avenue for both sectors to be united to provide a more sustainable primary care of the highest standard. It does not augur well if the public and the private sector delivery are divergent. A national policy on standardisation of primary care that is sustainable and achievable in both the sectors is urgently needed. It is also desirable that there is a convergence of both sectors in preparation for the social health insurance which would be the preferred system of healthcare which would also fulfil the commitment in the Declaration to leave no one behind and to prevent poverty as a result of catastrophic spending for health care by individuals.

MMA has expressed its desire and willingness to work together with the Ministry of Health and hopes that further progressive engagement to achieve this will be forthcoming.

MMA members in primary care need to be cognisant of the challenges ahead and take the necessary steps to enhance their practice. MMA has been in consultation with several agencies to provide for further training and courses for the general practitioners in private practice. An agreement was signed by MMA with iHEED from Ireland to conduct courses in the management of diabetes mellitus initially, and for others subsequently. More information will be published later when the implementation timeline has been firmed.



Gleaming city of Astana



Baiterek – Tree of life. An architectural master piece, a symbol of the Kazakh legend of Samruk, the holy bird laying the golden egg in its nest with a wicked dragon Aydakhar hiding among the roots resembling the everlasting fight of good and evil



The Palace of Independence, the venue of the Global Conference on Primary Care

December is the holiday season and many would be traveling. Please stay safe and take care of your health.

I wish all our Christian members
a Merry and Joyous Christmas and
a Happy New Year to all.





“When you’re finished changing,
you’re finished.”

Benjamin Franklin

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