Universal health coverage is the single most powerful concept that public health has to offer, says WHO Director-General

The Sixty-fifth World Health Assembly opened on Monday, May 21, 2012 with a discussion on the theme of "Towards Universal Coverage".

The President of the Sixty-fourth World Health Assembly Dr. Christos Patsalides of Cyprus welcomed the country delegations on behalf of the Health Assembly and the World Health Organization (WHO) before calling on Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, representing the Secretary-General of the United Nations to address the Assembly.

Following the morning elections of the President and five Vice-Presidents of the Sixty-fifth Assembly, WHO Director-General Margaret Chan took the stage to present on the work of the WHO with special attention to the theme of "Towards universal coverage".

During Dr. Chan's remarks, she said:

"Following publication of the 2010 World Health Report on health system financing, more than 60 countries have approached WHO seeking technical support for their plans to move towards universal coverage."
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What we are seeing goes against the historical pattern, where social services shrink when money gets tight. I think this drive to expand coverage is a powerful signal. Despite deepening financial austerity, the will to do the right thing, the fair thing, for people's health prevails.

All of these examples, all of my personal experiences over the past five years, bring me to one overarching conclusion. Universal health coverage is the single most powerful concept that public health has to offer.

Universal coverage is relevant to every person on this planet. It is a powerful equalizer that abolishes distinctions between the rich and the poor, the privileged and the marginalized, the young and the old, ethnic groups, and women and men.

Universal health coverage is the best way to cement the gains made during the previous decade. It is the ultimate expression of fairness. This is the anchor for the work of WHO as we move forward.”

After her speech, delegates from Canada, Denmark (as Presidency of the European Union), Thailand, China, Islamic Republic of Iran, Nigeria, Brazil, United Kingdom, India, United States, Brunei Darussalam, South Africa, Finland, Italy, Kenya, Germany, Singapore, Norway, Australia, Mexico, Ukraine, Zimbabwe, Cuba, and the Philippines were invited to share a few remarks on their countries progress towards UHC as well as voice their support for UHC as a post-2015 Millennium Development Goal.

All WHO member countries have been invited to share remarks on the global movement towards UHC throughout the general discussion, which is expected to last through Wednesday, May 23, 2012.

The World Health Assembly is taking place in Geneva, Switzerland from May 21-26, 2012. To read the full transcript of Dr. Chan's speech, click here. To keep up to date with the latest World Health Assembly news follow UHC Forward on Twitter at @UHCForward or hashtag #WHA65.