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Unequivocal regional support for Margaret Chan's commitment to primary health care

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Your May 31 Editorial (p 1811)¹ appropriately expresses the intent of the WHO Director-General, Margaret Chan, to revitalise the vision laid out in the 1978 Alma-Ata Declaration.² It states, "Whether WHO's six Regional Directors, who have influence at country level, support Chan's primary health care agenda is unclear".

Chan's commitment to primary health care is in itself an expression of the unequivocal support from the six Regional Directors and of the unanimity of views among the senior management of the organisation with regard to primary health care. Despite the wide variation across and within regions with respect to health challenges and the responses required to address these, there is mutual agreement that primary health care will continue to be central to WHO's strategy to strengthen health systems towards the vision of "Health for All". This is reflected not only in the resolutions endorsed by the World Health Assembly and the Regional Committees but also in the country-led programmes supported by WHO that uphold the values and principles of Health for All and the strategy of primary health care.³⁻⁹

The conformity of views goes beyond primary health care. The Regional Directors share Chan's vision and fully support the six priority areas she set out as the focus of WHO's work: development for health; health security; building the capacity of health systems; developing better information and knowledge, which includes setting the agenda for research and development and building evidence for health; enhancing partnerships; and improving the performance of the organisation.¹⁰

The support of the Regional Directors for Chan is built on the frank and frequent interaction among the seven elected officers of the organisation to evolve a unified strategy, as well as their own commitment to the universal values of social justice, equity, and recognition of health as a human right that is embedded in the WHO constitution and reaffirmed in the Alma-Ata declaration.

A comprehensive series of regional conferences, endorsed by WHO and emphasising the need for well performing health systems based on primary health care, is currently taking place. The first of these was held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in August, 2007, followed by similar conferences in Beijing, China; Bangkok, Thailand; and Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. In October, nations from the European Region will meet in Almaty (formerly Alma-Ata) to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Declaration, and a conference of the Eastern Mediterranean Region will be held in Doha, Qatar, in November, 2008, the theme of which is "Primary health care: the foundation for health and well-being". Similarly, South East Asia Region is also hosting a conference on revitalising primary health care in August, 2008, in Jakarta, Indonesia. These conferences are an expression as much of the commitment by countries of the regions as of the Regional Offices to primary health care.

In addition, the Director-General and the Regional Directors agreed in early 2008 to present a common document

on primary health care as the basis for a substantive discussion during the upcoming Regional Committees. The outcome of these discussions will greatly contribute to the process of renewal of primary health care in the subsequent meetings of the Executive Board of WHO and during the World Health Assembly in 2009.

Learning from the post-Alma-Ata experience, WHO's commitment to Health for All and primary health care strategy has to be long-term and unwavering over the coming decades. And although a decade from now there will be a different Director-General and Regional Directors, the onus is on the current leadership of WHO, under the guidance of the 193 Member States, to ensure that primary health care does not remain an approach driven by motivated individuals but is enmeshed in the fibre that binds the organisation's strategic objectives together and to its three levels.

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