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**Opening Remarks**

Mr President, Honourable Ministers, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all I would like to thank President Fox, Dr Frenk, and the Government of Mexico for their hospitality, and for all the care and thought they have put into preparing this landmark conference on health research.

Your discussions here this week can open up the way

- to controlling the diseases of poverty;
- to building health systems that meet today's and tomorrow's most urgent needs;
- and to putting health knowledge to good use where it is most needed.

Combined into the Mexico Agenda for Health Research, your recommendations can bring about a major shift towards more innovative and effective action that will protect and improve world health.

For many decades medical science has been extending our power to prevent and control disease. We expect it to continue to do so, bringing with it more and more benefits for human health.

But we are increasingly aware of unsolved problems, accumulating dangers, and new challenges. We continue to struggle with HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and maternal and childhood deaths. Rich and poor countries alike have to contend with increasing burdens of diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease, road traffic injuries, and mental ill-health. We are faced with the threat of global pandemics of new diseases such as SARS and avian influenza.

Why is the world so vulnerable to health problems that science is supposed to be able to solve? I will confine myself to just two of the reasons.

The first is weak health systems. We have been very successful at developing vaccines, drugs and diagnostics, but much less so at getting them to the people who need them. Research now needs to turn its attention to the financing, workforce and information systems on which health depends. Where problems are defined and understood we can work consistently towards solving them.

The second reason I want to emphasize is the failure to base policy on existing knowledge. Reliable information produced by excellent research exists, but it is not sufficiently used to shape decision-making. Ignoring research evidence is harmful to patients and wastes resources.

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The *World report on knowledge for better health* spells out some of these problems in more detail, and starts to point the way forward. I recommend it as a valuable reference point for your discussions.

More openness and better access to research findings are also urgently needed if decision-makers are to obtain the guidance they need.

Three weeks ago in Washington I joined the launch of the World Alliance on Patient Safety. It is working to protect patients by promoting norms, policies and standards based on the best evidence available. Other such initiatives are needed, particularly for the millions who do not even have access to basic health services.

In short, new research can contribute directly to building strong health systems, and the research findings we already have can be far better used. A substantial increase in investment is urgently needed in these two areas. I urge governments and the supporters of research to make this provision, which will yield a very high return in benefits for health.

WHO is committed to realizing the potential of research in its own work. Our global Advisory Committee on Health Research will continue to play a key role in helping us to achieve this. Under the highly capable leadership of Professor Judith Whitworth, from Australia, who has just been appointed as its Chair, the ACHR will focus on applying the best research and evidence in the world to WHO's technical, normative and advisory functions.

The next four days give us a unique opportunity to ensure that health research fulfils its great potential. Let us make the most of it.

Thank you.