



MESSAGE OF THE DIRECTOR

Dr. Mirta Roses Periago, Director of PAHO, reflects on the importance of information in creating a more equitable and healthy Region.

Throughout its history, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) has relied on vaccines to fight disease and improve health in the Americas. Early in the century, for example, there were impressive efforts to eradicate yellow fever and smallpox from the Region. But it was with the genesis of the Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) in the late 1970s that the role of vaccines and immunization programs in improving the health of the people in the Americas took a quantum leap. Coverage rates skyrocketed from a paltry 10% to between 80% and 90%, on average, and the number of vaccines routinely used in immunization programs steadily increased.

The countries of the Americas and PAHO, in a spirit of true Pan Americanism and in

pursuit of equity, have worked through EPI to achieve dramatic successes. The Americas was the first region in the world to eradicate smallpox and polio, and measles is on the verge of being eradicated. These pioneering initiatives have made our Region a model and inspiration for the rest of the world. EPI has made invaluable contributions in terms of social mobilization and community participation, and it has left behind lasting lessons in developing models and tools for interagency cooperation. We will continue to strengthen EPI to ensure that its contribution to the health, information, surveillance, and local health systems endures well into the future.

The challenges ahead for vaccines and immunization programs are onerous. In the coming years, we will have to view infectious agents as natural risks to be dealt with in a globalized planet. We must move beyond simply trying to eliminate infectious agents to trying to reduce the vulnerability of individuals. Having attained survival through the natural selection of the few, we must now attempt to strengthen all in an equitable way. We must consider vaccination as a basic element in protecting health. In other words, we should not merely seek to alleviate suffering, we must aspire to improve the population's quality of life and well-being.

We will also have to face challenges in terms of the financial, political, and oper-

ational sustainability of immunization programs within complex and changing health systems. In this context, vaccines should become a basic right for our populations, not simply a tool for reducing illness. If we move in this direction, I have no doubt that vaccination programs and vaccine development efforts will gain new allies, thereby ensuring the political and financial sustainability of vaccines, and most especially, the ethical sustainability of vaccines.

Vaccines: Preventing Disease and Protecting Health looks at the success of historical immunization efforts; charts the future of vaccine development ventures targeting new diseases and involving new vaccine delivery systems; explores the role of vaccines in defending against bioterrorism; and examines regulatory, safety, and financing issues; as well as the future role of vaccines and immunization programs in public health. As such, it should become an invaluable weapon in the public health armamentarium for policy makers, academics, public health officers, scientists working in vaccine development, and, perhaps more importantly, for the indefatigable health workers and volunteers throughout the Region who have carried high the standard of public health's mission. Use it well.

—*Mirta Roses Periago,*
Director, PanAmerican
Health Organization