

Women's Cancer Initiative: A joint commitment to save lives
First Meeting of the PAFNCDs Women's Cancer Initiative

February 5-7, 2013
Room B

DR. ETIENNE'S REMARKS

It is my honor to welcome you all to PAHO. You should know that this my first public activity as head of this Organization, having taken office only last Thursday. As I begin my five year term, serving as the Director of the Pan American Health Organization, priority will be given to address the NCD epidemic. I am delighted that we are gathering with representatives from all sectors of society to join forces to confront women's cancers in the Americas and to commit to save lives.

This multi-sector meeting of the Pan American Forum for Action on NCDs, created as a platform for a "whole of government and whole of society effort", takes place following on World Cancer Day, which as you know was yesterday.

Our Organization-wide efforts will be focused in order to be commensurate with the enormous health, social and economic burden that NCDs pose in our Region. The prevention and control of NCDs requires a foundation with strong health systems and services, based on primary care, and universal health coverage. Thus, health system strengthening, reducing the health service barriers and inequities in care will go alongside our efforts for NCDs and cancer.

As the world's oldest public health institution, PAHO is in a privileged position working closely with the Ministries of Health to strengthen their health systems and implement actions for disease prevention and control. But, while the Ministries of Health are our main stakeholders, I strongly believe, as our Member States did at the UN High Level Meeting on NCD in September 2011, that no one institution, or one sector, can tackle the problem of NCDs and cancer by itself. PAHO's convening power and catalytic role, as well as honest brokering role will continue to be amplified. We will build new alliances and relationships across sectors to create a strong multi-sector response to the NCD problem in the Americas.

Today, we are here because of the 400,000 women who are newly diagnosed each year with breast and cervical cancer, and the 120,000 women who are dying from these diseases in the Americas region. Cancer of the cervix is especially tragic, as the 30,000 deaths we have per

year in the Region are almost completely preventable and the majority of these women are from vulnerable and marginalized populations. In addition, there is a tremendous amount of stigma and discrimination experienced by these women, with a diagnosis of cancer associated with reproduction. We know that many of these women's lives can be saved with greater awareness, HPV vaccination, effective screening, early diagnosis and accessible treatment. For a public health problem of this magnitude, and given that we have the know-how and technology to save lives, we urgently need all sectors of society to work together to help ensure equitable access to cancer prevention, screening, diagnosis, treatment and palliative care. That is why today, we are galvanizing the support of the international health community to jointly accelerate breast and cervical cancer prevention and control in the Americas.

The tremendous turnout here is a testimony to the commitment and good will that exists in this community to address the rising burden of these women's cancers. There are over 90 people with us, representing the various sectors from governments, non-governmental organizations, academia, international organizations, and private companies. With this diverse range of representation, we have: advocates, epidemiologists, gynecologists, oncologists, social scientists, economists, researchers, communicators, entrepreneurs, among other disciplines. And we are thrilled that you have responded so enthusiastically and whole-heartedly to join our call to action to help us create a platform for public-private partnership for women's cancers, and to develop a multi-sector plan of action to collectively address breast and cervical cancer in the Region.

The timing for this endeavor is right. In addition to the Political Declaration of the UN High Level Meeting on NCDs from September 2011 to which I referred earlier, the recently adopted WHO Global Monitoring Framework for NCDs, calls for a 25% reduction in premature mortality from NCDs by 2025. It has provided governments with tangible targets and indicators for cancer incidence, cervical cancer screening, and HPV vaccination. It is upon us as gathered here today, to guide efforts and investments to support governments to achieve these targets and indicators.

Many of you here are already partnering with PAHO and we value our partnership and will continue to deepen it, and expand it to include the many new organizations that have become involved and have expressed interest in saving lives and advancing a region-wide plan of action for breast and cervical cancer prevention and control.

We see our common efforts around four main areas: advocacy and communications to mobilize women, communities and stakeholders; building health service capacity for breast and cervical cancer screening, diagnosis, treatment, and palliative care; scaling up access to HPV vaccination; and expanding research.

We recognize the many global and regional initiatives and collaborations currently underway for women's cancer and at the same time we are aware of the strong need to create a platform for dialogue and exchange between the various sectors and with the various initiatives, in order to develop a more systematic and coordinated approach to institutionalize these efforts within public health programs across the Region. We need to share and mobilize resources -- human, infrastructural and financial – to maximize health outcomes for women, and have a significant impact on disease burden.

We look forward to hearing your ideas and suggestions for how we can work together, with mutual respect and benefitting from the strengths that everyone brings to the table, to create the necessary synergy by connecting the various initiatives around a common goal to save thousands of women's lives in our Region.

So over the next 3 days, we will get to know each other and our work on women's cancers, and together we will develop and implement a multi-year plan of action, that will have components that each one of us will be carrying out, and others that we will do jointly, but all connected and leading to the desired outcome.

We will serve as an honest broker and as an integral part of the Inter-American system, we are in a unique position to mobilize this high-level political support for women's cancers, and we intend to do so through advocacy and through our normative role and building capacity for cancer prevention and control.

I thank you for joining PAHO in this endeavor. I assure you that PAHO's commitment to this issue is unwavering, and I call you all to join forces to implement the available evidence and tools and to strengthen our resolve to saving women's lives in the Americas.