

PAHO Director Dr Carissa F. Etienne remarks - June 30th

Today is a very special day for Cuba and the Americas as a region. We are here to celebrate what is a truly historic accomplishment.

Cuba has become the first country in the world to receive validation from the World Health Organization that it has eliminated mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis.

I would like to congratulate the government and the people of Cuba, represented by the honorable minister of health, Roberto Morales Ojeda, and his colleagues who are with us here today. I also want to congratulate all the Cuban health workers, women, mothers, fathers and families who have made this possible.

This is a tremendous success for Cuba and public health, and it is a major battle won in the response to HIV. It is an achievement that will mean a brighter health future for Cuban mothers and future generations of Cuban boys and girls alike. Indeed, it represents a major step in Cuba toward an “AIDS-free generation.”

This historic achievement was made possible by a health system that provides equitable, integrated health services that include difficult and complex interventions like those required for prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis.

Cuba’s success demonstrates that universal access and universal health coverage are feasible and indeed are the key to success, even against challenges as daunting as HIV.

This achievement also shows clearly that vertical programs can be mainstreamed into health systems in ways that generate winning synergies, especially if they are incorporated into well-established programs such as maternal and child care.

Cuba’s achievement today provides inspiration for other countries to advance toward elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis, a goal PAHO Member States collectively endorsed at the 50th PAHO Directing Council in 2010.

Currently, six other countries and territories in the Americas are in a position to request WHO validation of the elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis: Anguilla, Barbados, Canada, Montserrat, Puerto Rico and the United States.

In 2013—the most recent period for which we have data—just over 2,300 babies were born with HIV in Latin America and the Caribbean, about 5% of all babies born in our region to mothers with HIV. This rate was 72% lower than in 2010, but our goal is to bring that percentage down to less than 2%.

To achieve that, we need a final push to ensure that *all* pregnant women have access to sexual and reproductive health services that include HIV and syphilis testing and

antiretroviral and penicillin treatment. Treatment is essential to save women's lives, to clear maternal syphilis and to reduce the chances that mothers will transmit these infections to their babies.

Halting mother-to-child transmission of HIV is one of several key steps the countries of our Region are taking to halt the HIV epidemic, and it has created the opportunity to address syphilis simultaneously by including testing and treatment for syphilis in the same package of prenatal interventions.

The Americas was the first region—just last year—to set ambitious new targets for HIV care. We are now engaged in setting new targets for prevention and beginning to consider a scenario of full control of HIV and even the elimination of HIV transmission as a public health problem in the future. The goal of eliminating congenital syphilis was set much earlier, in the mid-1990s. Yet it took the great momentum of our region's HIV response to move that agenda forward.

These are goals that were virtually unthinkable a few years ago. I challenge all of us to set our sights high, in the best tradition of Pan American health action, and to roll up our sleeves to carry out the hard work that is needed to reach these visionary goals.

Cuba's success is without doubt an important victory in the fight against HIV and sexually transmitted infections. But we know the battle continues, especially in vulnerable populations, where the epidemic is concentrated. We need to redouble our efforts to advance closer to the goal of HIV and congenital syphilis no longer being threats to public health.

Again, I commend the Cuban government and the Cuban people, and I pledge PAHO's continued support to maintain this important achievement.

I also want to thank the Regional Validation Committee for its outstanding work, and my staff in the PAHO Secretariat whose work has contributed so much to these efforts.

Let me extend my congratulations to the partners who have supported the regional elimination initiative since it was launched in 2011. I want to thank UNICEF, our co-lead in this specific area of work; UNAIDS, for its relentless advocacy and its multisectoral perspective; the CDC, for its technical excellence; PEPFAR and the Global Fund for their support, other UN Agencies and of course our colleagues at WHO headquarters in Geneva.

I look forward to continuing to work with all our partners in the response to both HIV and other sexual transmitted infections throughout the Americas.

Congratulations, honorable minister, and to everyone who has played a part in this historic achievement. Future generations of Cubans will have a better start to their lives because of what you have achieved today.

Thank you.