



**Pan American
Health
Organization**



**World Health
Organization**

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE
Americas

53rd DIRECTING COUNCIL

66th SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF WHO FOR THE AMERICAS

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**ADDRESS BY DR. MIGUEL ÁNGEL LEZANA FERNÁNDEZ
UPON RECEIVING THE PAHO AWARD FOR ADMINISTRATION (2014)**

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**53rd Directing Council of PAHO
66th Session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Americas**

Madame President of the Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization,
Ms. Carina Vance Mafla, and Officers of the Board,
Dr. Carissa Etienne, Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau,
Distinguished Ministers of Health,
Dr. Mercedes Juan López, Secretary of Health of Mexico,
Esteemed delegates and guests,
Ladies and gentlemen:

The ancient master of Taoism, Lao-Tse, once said, “Acknowledgement is the memory of the heart.”

Inspired by that thought, together with the honor of accepting this award, I feel myself obliged to thank the people who made it possible.

First place goes to the health authorities of Mexico, particularly to Dr. Mercedes Juan López, Dr. José Meljem Moctezuma, and Ms. Hilda Dávila Chávez, for having dared to propose my candidacy. Thank you.

To the judges of the Awards Committee, for having recommended granting me this award; and to the remaining members of the Executive Committee, who resolved to accept that recommendation. Thank you.

And of course, to this Directing Council, for the honor of having been invited to this ceremony. Thank you.

In the course of my life, I have had the good fortune to find people who—with a generous heart, acute intelligence, and unbreakable spirit—have inspired and simultaneously molded my path towards honest, creative, innovative, and solidaristic professional performance.

Among those people, I cannot help mentioning my friends and teachers, Jaime Sepúlveda, Julio Frenk, and José Luis Bobadilla.

My greatest acknowledgement of course goes to my beloved family.

To that tireless companion in my life's journey, my beloved wife Verónica, for her inexhaustible strength in reaching goals and her irreplaceable comfort in moments of failure. Thank you.

To my children—Santiago, Gonzalo, and Paulina, the latter two present here today—for having spurred my determination to never stop struggling, for being the source of complete and inexhaustible happiness and of pride in their having opened up new horizons. Thank you; I love you very much.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In this world of globalization and upheaval in which we are fated to live, we professionals devoted to public health are obliged to take on a position of privileged leadership.

Public health is facing unprecedented challenges of global scope, growing complexity, and rapid expansion that we can only face through joint consensual action in accordance with essential principles that bestow preferential status on equity, justice, and solidarity.

In this scenario, the role of such multilateral cooperation agencies as the Pan American Health Organization—along with that of their Member States—deserves to be strengthened and guided towards full development of their own human and physical capabilities, thus giving real form to the predominance of health promotion, the modification of social determinants, the communication of risks, and the prevention of disease as leading instruments of change.

The risks to global public health posed by the onset and rapid growth of emerging and reemerging infectious diseases—or the intensification of their transmission in endemic areas—are both evident and conspicuous.

Among the most relevant examples, we have the Chikungunya epidemic in the Caribbean, the outbreaks of enterovirus D68 in several cities of the United States and Canada, the increase in cases of whooping cough, or the reappearance of measles virus transmission in different areas of our region.

The Americas is not the only region of the world facing these challenges. The international dissemination of the wild poliovirus in Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia; the Ebola virus epidemic in West Africa; zika virus outbreaks in Oceania; cases of coronavirus respiratory syndrome on the Arabian Peninsula in the Middle East; intensified transmission of Japanese encephalitis virus on the Indian subcontinent and in Southeast Asia, or of cholera in Africa—these are but a small sample of these challenges.

The appearance of emerging infectious diseases is nothing new in our history. What do turn out to be innovative indeed are two elements that add great complexity to this phenomenon.

On the one hand is their speed of expansion, favored by intensification in the international movement of people and goods, or by the movement of broad population groups as a consequence of social and military conflicts toward places of overcrowding and deficient sanitary conditions.

The second element we can define as modification of the epidemiological substratum in which this phenomenon occurs.

In many of the scenarios where there are outbreaks of some of these emerging infectious diseases, the population faces an increase in the incidence of noncommunicable diseases, of chronic evolution and with high disability rates—such as the metabolic syndrome associated with overweight and obesity, chronic respiratory and liver diseases, or mental disorders.

This fact can rapidly lead to a care crisis in the public health system capable of triggering profound social disruption.

Once an emerging infectious disease breaks out among a population with a high prevalence of comorbidities, the risk of complications substantially increases—thus inducing a greater demand for services, with long hospital stays in a context of limited clinical space.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The changes that we are experiencing in our lifetime should propel us towards a time of change. We cannot continue to face the appearance of emerging problems armed with the same strategies we used in the past.

The classic model for dealing with these problems, based on utilizing the available hospital infrastructure, is clearly overrun.

We should turn our eyes towards the community, towards homes. We should switch to a more effective alternative for preparedness, early detection, and rapid response to threats to health security.

I shall conclude with one of my favorite quotations by the great poet Octavio Paz, whose centennial we are incidentally celebrating this year: “The most dangerous human masses are those in whose veins the venom of fear ...the fear of change, has been injected.”

You are both the hope and the vehicle of change in favor of public health, which fulfills our aspirations and meets the needs of all the people of this proud region.

Thank you very much.

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