

CARICOM HEALTH MINISTERS LAUNCH REGIONAL INITIATIVE FOR HIV AND SYPHILIS FREE GENERATIONS

2015 Deadline to End Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV and Congenital Syphilis

By 2015 the overwhelming majority of children born in the Caribbean will be free of HIV and syphilis. This is the major objective of an initiative launched Sunday, September 27, 2009, during the 18th Meeting of the Caucus of CARICOM Ministers Responsible for Health, at the Headquarters of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) in Washington D.C.

The “Regional Initiative for the Elimination of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV and Congenital Syphilis in Latin America and the Caribbean” is supported by PAHO and UNICEF with inputs from all the major stakeholders including national governments, NGOs and other UN agencies. The Caribbean has taking the lead and is moving ahead with the involvement of the health sectors of the broader Caribbean (English-, Dutch- French-, and Spanish- speaking countries) with support from the CARICOM Secretariat, PAHO, UNICEF, UNAIDS and the UNFPA, under coordination of the PAHO HIV Caribbean Office (PHCO).

Dr. Merceline Dahl-Regis, Chief Medical Officer of the Commonwealth of The Bahamas, shared with the Ministers the strategic framework on behalf of the Caribbean Technical Working Group. The objectives of the Initiative are to reduce by 2015 the incidence in the Caribbean of mother-to-child transmission of HIV to 0.3 cases for every 1000 live births or less; the mother-to-child transmission of HIV to 2% or less; and congenital syphilis to 0.5 cases per 1000 live births or less. This will be achieved by strengthening core health system functions to improve quality and coverage of maternal and child health services to effectively integrate cost-effective interventions to prevent the two conditions. Key functions are surveillance, strengthening of human resources and integrated, decentralized care.

At the moment the Caribbean has the second highest burden of HIV infection in the world and mother-to-child transmission of HIV constitutes about 8 – 10% of all HIV transmissions in the Caribbean.

PAHO’s Director, Dr. Mirta Roses Periago, commended the Caribbean for being the first region to publicly and boldly consider the target of elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV. Dr. Roses, commenting on the region’s leadership in public health, including the elimination of polio, measles and smallpox, stressed, “We are convinced that the Caribbean has the potential to become the first region in the developing world to achieve the elimination targets.”

Dr. Margaret Chan, WHO Director General, expressed her congratulations to the Ministers of Health for this pioneer effort, and emphasized the need for strengthening maternal and child health services for overall health improvement. Dr. Chan said that strengthening primary care and women’s health are central to WHO’s programme of work under her leadership.

Dominica’s Minister of Health and the Environment, the Hon. John Fabien, who is responsible to the CARICOM Council for Human and Social Development (COHSOD) for health matters, stated that the Initiative provides several challenges and opportunities to the region’s health sector. These include mobilizing national and inter-regional resources to support the Initiative; and intensifying the region’s efforts to fix its health systems so they could reach and provide quality services for the underserved and the vulnerable. Minister Fabien pointed out that effective implementation will require political and technical leadership that can only be provided by the participants at the Caucus, the Ministers of Health and Chief Medical Officers of the Region.

Commenting on the need for unity of purpose, Minister Fabien said, “The Caribbean has demonstrated its ability to perform exceptionally when it comes to public health action. Let us continue that tradition and wholeheartedly take on this challenge and opportunity. Let us show the world that it can be done.”

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