



**Pan American
Health
Organization**



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**ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY THE DIRECTOR-ELECT
OF THE PAN AMERICAN SANITARY BUREAU**

Dr. Carissa F. Etienne

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President of the Pan American Sanitary Conference,
Ministers and Secretaries of Health,
Ambassadors,
Representatives of PAHO Member States, Participating States, Associate Members and
Observer States,
Director-General of WHO,
Colleagues.

Let me begin by thanking you the Member States for once again placing your trust in me to lead this venerable Organization. I feel privileged that you have called upon me to serve the peoples of the Americas, and I do firmly pledge to do my best to continue to answer this noble calling.

At the same time, I cannot help but acknowledge that this election, this small victory today, is due to far more than my own humble efforts. It is in fact a testament to the hard work of PAHO's staff, to those who toil day-in and day-out to improve the health of our peoples. Many of those staff are in this room today or watching online, and I would like to give them a hearty applause of appreciation [Lead applause].

From an even wider perspective, I owe the success of the past five years to the tens of thousands of health professionals who have worked tirelessly on the front lines to deliver health services throughout the Americas.

Similarly, the political commitment to health by PAHO's Member States has been exceptional. We have been true partners with multilateral institutions, governments, academia, and civil society. From Tierra del Fuego to the Darien Gap and up to Baffin Bay, from Havana to Port of Spain, we have toiled in solidarity to improve the health and well-being of the peoples of the Americas. Despite transient political divisions, we have built on our common humanity and helped our brethren most in need. It was and is still the right thing to do.

Speaking of brethren, I am glad that our newly elected Director General Tedros of the World Health Organization is in the room today. Dr. Tedros and I have established an excellent relationship in the few short months since he has been in office. He brings fresh leadership to WHO, with a clear vision and a strong mandate. I believe that PAHO's relationship with WHO, as both the Regional Office for the Americas and as an independent multilateral organization, is stronger than ever.

You have heard much this week about the achievements of the past five years, through my quinquennial report and the Health in the Americas discussion. The Region has made substantial progress on many of the key health indicators, although significant disparities still persist among and within countries. We are nonetheless building on a strong foundation, and for the first time in decades we see peace in all of our nations! [lead applause]

The destination going forward is clear as between the SDGs and our new Sustainable Health Agenda for the Americas 2030, we have a set of tangible and measurable goals on which we will work collectively to achieve. Determining what path we will pursue to arrive at our destination as individual nations, communities and as a regional block, will be our next task. Development of the next PAHO Strategic Plan will begin in early 2018 and we will have a country consultative group advising us throughout the development process. I will invite you to join us as we plot the way forward together.

I intend to frame the next Strategic Plan, and indeed my second and final term, as a commitment to every person living in this hemisphere. A commitment to deliver to all of our peoples, from all walks of society:

- a long and productive life, with quality care into our senior years,
- access to quality health services without fear of impoverishment,
- access to medicines and vaccines that we can afford, including effective antibiotics,
- freedom from preventable diseases, with reduced exposure to disease vectors,
- access to sexual and reproductive health services,
- access to healthy, nutritious food that allow us to grow and learn,
- clean water and adequate sanitation, and
- last but not least, safe refuge and adequate health care in the face of disasters and health emergencies.

However, action by the health sector alone will not be sufficient to achieve our objectives. This is why, when I visit your countries, I meet with heads of state and officials from across other sectors. To all of the governments and peoples that have so generously welcomed me to their shores during the past five years, please accept my

sincerest gratitude. Ministers and secretaries of health, I do my best to support you and to obtain the technical and financial resources that you need to improve the health outcomes in your countries. Looking beyond government, however, I am convinced that we must mobilize our partners in academia, civil society and the private sector.

The private sector is not our enemy – it is the engine of economic growth and prosperity. However, as has been amply demonstrated in the past decades, the private sector alone is incapable of delivering essential social services to all people. A strong government role is fundamental to ensuring the availability of quality, affordable health care, the keystone of universal health access and coverage. Let us be clear:

- Strong governance in the health sector is critical. It has been demonstrated that where the government / mandates and ensures essential quality services and medicines, these can be delivered much less expensively and more equitably.
- Out-of-pocket expenses must be minimized or altogether eliminated; health care is an essential public good, and like education it should be free at the point of service to ensure that even the poorest receive it.
- Climate change is real. In the health sector this means mitigating the effects of more frequent and severe weather events and temperature fluctuations; tackling the spread of disease vectors into locations where they were previously unknown; and ensuring resilient and SMART health services for populations affected or displaced by rising sea levels.
- We are now faced with the frightening threat of overweight and undernourished children, as more of our young people are raised on cheap, salty, sugar- and fat-filled foods and drinks. We are witnessing the food industry adopting tactics used by the tobacco industry to fight pro-health measures such as food labelling and increased taxation of unhealthy foods. We must not stand aside and allow this to make our families and children obese, with all the accompanying health consequences that are harming and killing our people.
- Some people think the fight against big tobacco has been won, but this is far from the truth – there are around 127 million smokers in our Region today. 127 million people at risk for serious illness. Tobacco use is the main preventable risk factor for NCDs. Yet, there are Member States in our Region that have not as yet implemented the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, even though more than a decade has elapsed since its approval. This is unacceptable. We must tax tobacco products, ensure smoke free environments, mandate stringent packaging guidelines, and ban advertising.

These statements are not my opinions – they are based on scientific evidence. PAHO, along with WHO, must not be afraid to take evidence-based positions on issues that are at times perceived to be beyond the realm of public health.

I cannot neglect to speak on a topic that has been raised to me by several of you in this room. Societal violence is a menace in many of our countries, especially those in Central America and the Caribbean. Certainly the impact of violence on our societies and our health systems is irrefutable. Such violence is linked to many factors, not least of which is the illicit drug trade, organized criminal and gang activities, and the lack of economic alternatives for many poor young men across our Region. However, I do not believe that societal violence is solely a public health issue. Addressing it requires an all-of-government all of society approach. [short pause]

As many of you may know, Haiti holds a special place in my heart. Our Francophone Caribbean sister has had a long and difficult history, due in no small part to the effects of external actors. As long as Haiti continues to experience a maternal mortality ratio of well over 300 deaths per 100,000 live births, we as a region have failed. I have dedicated a significant part of my time and attention to Haiti during these past five years, and I intend to re-double my efforts for the next five. I will be ceaseless in my advocacy. Let me gratefully acknowledge the many countries in the Region that are working actively with Haiti, and I hope I can count on your continued support.

As for the Pan American Sanitary Bureau, let me acknowledge that we are on solid footing, yet we must strive for constant improvement. I can assure you that I will not shrink from taking the steps necessary to ensure the ongoing prosperity of PAHO, and its continued success in impacting the major public health issues of our time. Whether it is in the elaboration of Strategic Plans, definition of programmatic direction, joint assessments of the performance of our country offices, and indeed through Governing Bodies meetings like this one, I have come to rely on you, our Member States, as partners every step of the way.

To my family, not here but near to my heart, thank you for your unwavering love and support. A very special thanks to my husband, who was forced by the hurricane to remain in Dominica this week: you are my rock.

So once again thank you all. We are on this journey together, and I will do everything in my power to serve our greater cause...that all people of these magnificent Americas can lead healthy, productive lives. That our children grow into a world of ever greater hope and possibility.

Thank you and God bless you all.
