

Convocation Address by Dr. Syeda Hameed, Member, Planning Commission at the 46th Annual Conference of NAMS on 28 October, 2006, Hyderabad

It is my honour to be here with you today, at the 46th National Academy of Medical Sciences Annual Conference. It gives me great pleasure to participate in a conference organized by the very institution which was inaugurated by India's first PM with a mandate to find solutions to health problems of the nation and to foster talented medical and biomedical scientists in India. I would like to congratulate the Fellows and recipients of awards for their work and for upholding these lofty ideals.

I as a lay person, and you as experts, are all deeply concerned about health. I am here today not only because I am the Member responsible for Health at the Planning Commission, but because I am personally convinced that this is one aspect which touches the lives of each and every one of us – the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor. Without good health, there can be no happiness, no development and life as such. And I have seen this with my own eyes during my travels all the country – whether it is fibrosis in Malegaon or deficiencies and malnutrition in Bhadohi, from the dhanis of Udaipur and Barmer in Rajasthan to the remote villages of Phek district of Nagaland, everyone is burdened with health problems.

Wonderful discoveries and interventions in medicine and public health have always made a profound difference at every stage of economic development in all parts of the world. And that is why India today, while still poor, is on its way -- in a most historic way -- out of extreme poverty. In India, longevity has doubled from 32 years in 1947 to 66 years in 2004, IMR has fallen by over 70% points between 1974 and 1990, small pox and guinea worm have been eradicated. The Academy has contributed to the significant achievements in health and welfare. In the first thirty years of its existence, NAMS has made an important contribution to human resource development for health, to meet the needs of the rapidly expanding health system. The National Academy has played an important role in recognizing, nurturing and mentoring talented professionals. These professionals are the backbone of the health system in India – they have made the health system functional and delivered preventive, promotive, curative and rehabilitative services to the population. Their contribution to the unprecedented improvement in health status of the population between 1960 and 1990 is well recognized. We Indians can take pride in the fact that by and large the manpower required for our vast health infrastructure was trained within the country. Moreover, Indian health professionals have gained national and international recognition for their knowledge, skills, commitment and research. They are technically proficient and capable of performing sophisticated procedures, and that too at a fraction of the cost available in the West.

However the last decade has brought newer challenges to health professionals. Health is one of the greatest challenges of the Eleventh Five Year Plan which aims for faster and more inclusive growth. Levels of malnutrition and rates of infant and maternal deaths have stagnated since the 1990s. Currently, life expectancy at birth, infant and under 5 mortality levels are worse than those of Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Prevalence of morbidity due to communicable diseases has not declined – in fact every few months we face a new challenge, a new epidemic – be it dengue, malaria or chikungunya. Our health institutions are increasingly unable to meet the health needs of our people. Doctors and nurses are unwilling to be posted in remote villages where they have no access to any facilities. This is why in Barmer, over 40% of the doctor posts are lying vacant. In Udaipur, there are less than 50% ANMs and in Gajapati district in Orissa, the tribals sell whatever little possessions they have to take the advice of private medical practitioners. Even today, there are pockets of the country, like Malegaon, where there is not a single bed in a government hospital to treat cases of infections or carry out surgeries. This is despite the fact that diphtheria has resurfaced in the town, and there has been a dengue and chikungunya epidemic there.

Not only has there been a rise in the incidence of infections, but infections have become more difficult to combat because of development of antibiotic resistant strains of bacteria and emergence of HIV infection. We contribute to a fifth of the world's share of diseases and nutritional

deficiencies, and have the second largest number of HIV/AIDS cases after S Africa. These emerging challenges require urgent, appropriate and concerted action. The Government of India has recognized the National Academy of Medical Sciences as the Nodal Agency for Continuing Medical Education, so that it could contribute towards meeting the urgent need to upgrade the knowledge and skills of health personnel, to cope up with the mounting health problems. It is this institution that can produce committed professionals who will go to every nook and corner of our country and ensure that our people lead a healthy, happy and wholesome life.

And committed professionals can indeed do this. I have seen it in Ghadchiroli, where a doctor couple – Abhay and Rani Bang – through sheer commitment and dedication, have worked towards reducing neonatal mortality in this tribal district of Maharashtra. They have halved neonatal mortality and improved other indicators. They have ensured that Gonds get access to medical aid, that the women get fed during pregnancy and that infants don't succumb to sepsis or pneumonia. I have seen how a team of committed and dedicated professionals, people who have studied in the premier institutions of India and abroad, have brought about a silent revolution in the poorest part of Maharashtra. They have empowered ordinary people to take charge of their health, and consequently, their lives. And I am sure, that each one of you, sitting in this room has the potential to initiate many such silent revolutions in our country. Just a few weeks from now, I am going to visit Bilaspur. Here again, a group of doctors who have been trained and have worked at premier institutions across the country have given up all luxury to cater to the health needs of the tribal population of Chattisgarh. It is these people who have done the country proud. It is in them that our hope and faith for a better tomorrow lie.

I am glad to know that NAMS is also contributing to this process in its own way. The Institute has conducted CME programmes in all the regions of the country on topics ranging from basic sciences, surgery and medicine to health services. The Academy has also published Monographs based on Intra and Extramural CMEs, which are distributed to medical colleges and research institutions, so that even those who cannot attend the CME programmes have ready access to the knowledge. I am also very impressed by their use of Telemedicine to enable health professionals in remote regions to access information and participate in CME programmes. These efforts should be further strengthened and access to continuing multiprofessional education should be improved.

Modern science and medicine have already delivered effective technologies that, if brought to bear, would not only change and save lives by the millions but would enable our children to have a better future. And, it would enable the still-poor parts of the world today to get on a better economic path. Health and Medical education can thus act as major contributors for economic development. Health professionals and specialists are key in ensuring effective and wide-ranging delivery of these powerful tools, and can help to bring them to the poorest people of the world, to save, extend and improve lives, and make our world safer. I am glad to know that a panel of about fifty Emeritus Professors has been selected by the Institute to disseminate their knowledge and wisdom through lectures and mentoring programmes. I hope that this effort will pay rich dividends in terms of development of professionals with the right attitude and understanding of their role within the health system and within society, so that they are able to effectively fulfill their responsibilities and obligations.

I am also sure that the National Academy will do its best through its CME programmes to enable medical professionals to contribute to economic and human development in the country. It will help us to develop practitioners who don't just treat ailments but who can act as the friend, who enables a patient and her family to cope with the trauma of the disease; who can also be the philosopher who guides individuals towards healthy living habits.

I wish the Academy and its Fellows success in all their endeavours. May they stay at the helm of new opportunities and breakthroughs in medicine, and help make this world a better and healthier place to live in.