Health ministers to tackle increasing burden on services

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Finding ways to meet the health needs of an ageing, growing population with long-term, complex illnesses will dominate discussions at this year's Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting (CHMM).

The meeting will take place ahead of the World Health Assembly on 17 May 2015 in Geneva, and will address the theme, *Universal Health Coverage*, with an emphasis on ageing and good health.

It comes at a crucial time when experts from around the world will consolidate health priorities for the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals and underscore the role health plays in promoting economic and social development.

Commonwealth Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma said: "Inequities in access to health services combined with rising demand on health systems that are already overstretched present serious and urgent challenges in many Commonwealth member states. We seek to make a difference in the lives of Commonwealth citizens by advancing the principles of Universal Health Coverage (UHC), and by tackling non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

"Our annual Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting is a valuable opportunity for sharing knowledge of what works well, and for exchanging ideas and experience of policy solutions to the most pressing health needs in Commonwealth countries. We seek to assist by sharing best practice between member states, by forging strategic partnerships and developing innovative solutions."

Improvements in public health mean that people are living longer, but a sharp rise in NCDs is placing an increased burden on health systems. This is a challenge for all countries.

The WHO estimates NCDs – cardiovascular diseases, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes – account for 63 per cent of deaths worldwide. The worst affected are low-income, developing countries, with 80 per cent of deaths attributed to NCDs.

Developing countries, however, face the additional burden of combating communicable diseases and in this context, the impact of Ebola, also will be discussed at the meeting.

The principal aim of UHC is to improve health outcomes through equal access to quality health systems, including health protection, promotion of well-being, and the prevention of diseases and treatment services.

Ministers will identify measures to promote physical activity and healthy diets, as well as strategies to tackle tobacco use and alcohol misuse, as ways of reducing the strain on overstretched health systems.

Health ministers will also hear presentations from The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust on eradicating avoidable blindness and on the progress of the Commonwealth health hub – an online, knowledge-sharing platform, which aims to facilitate networking for policy development on UHC.

Outcomes of the meeting will be shared in an official statement. This will inform the Commonwealth Secretariat's ongoing work to improve the health and well-being of Commonwealth citizens in line with the Strategic Plan.

- See more at: http://thecommonwealth.org/media/press-release/health-ministers-tackle-increasing-burden-services#sthash.QO9PQDMj.dpuf

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