

WMA General Assembly Speech - Final Version

Introduction

Your excellency Dr. Sabin Nsanzimana, Minister of Health of Rwanda, WMA Executive Committee members, esteemed colleagues, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is both a privilege and an honor to stand before you today in the beautiful city of Kigali here in Rwanda.

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the outgoing WMA President, Dr. Osahon Enabulele for his invaluable service to this organization. I thank the Kuwait Medical Association for supporting my candidacy for WMA presidency.

I would like to kindly ask my family and friends who crossed thousands of miles to be here with me today, please stand. Your unwavering support has been my foundation, and I am deeply grateful for your presence.

A special thank you goes to my parents, Mr. Radwan Alqodmani and Ms. Wafaa Alobaid, who taught me that the sky is not the limit, but just the beginning.

And to Dr. Michele Ancona, my husband, thank you for being my rock, for supporting me, and for standing strong by my side.

I am deeply committed to my role as President of the World Medical Association. I value the trust that you, the members, have placed in me.

Today, I wish to outline some of the key issues we must address as an association.

Gender Equality

In a world where gender disparities are glaring especially in healthcare, it's time for action. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we witnessed a shocking ratio: only one woman was vaccinated for every three men in some countries. This disparity is not only limited to vaccinations but also extends to maternal healthcare.

I feel incredibly grateful for the opportunity I had to receive top-notch maternal healthcare services when I welcomed my daughter Yasmin into the world this past February. However, it pains me to acknowledge that this privilege isn't a universal reality for countless women across the globe.

Inequalities persist in many corners of the world, and it's disheartening to know that according to the WHO, even in the European Union, where women tend to outlive men, a significant portion of them spend most of their lives in poor health.

These disparities reach well beyond health. It's estimated that 200 million girls have undergone female genital mutilation, over 100 million girls are currently out of school, and a staggering 140 million girls are anticipated to marry before the age of 18 in the coming decade. Consequently, if the current trends continue unchecked, it will take us more than a century to close the global gender gap.

Recent studies show that a significant majority of the global health and social care workforce are women, constituting well over half. Despite contributing a substantial value to the health system, their crucial contributions persistently remain undervalued. Alarming, women hold just a quarter of leadership positions in healthcare. We witness gender inequity manifest in many ways, from sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination by both patients and colleagues to a noticeable gender pay gap and instances of violence within the workplace.

Therefore, the pursuit of gender equality is not merely a moral imperative—it is integral to the attainment of universal health coverage and is crucial for securing the health and well-being of all - leaving no one behind. It is essential in addressing the social determinants of health effectively.

The WMA will persistently advocate for gender equality. This includes fostering inclusive leadership opportunities within organized medicine and ensuring equal, high-quality, and safe healthcare services for women and a safe work environment for women physicians and other healthcare professionals.

Climate Change and Health

Colleagues, we are living in the era of global crises, marked by the Three Cs: climate change, COVID, and conflict. In 2019, WMA declared a climate emergency, recognizing the urgency of the situation. The impacts of climate change are already here and are disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations, including children. An alarming one billion children are impacted by changes in their environment.

Climate change stands as the paramount threat to public health, presenting substantial risks to the well-being of present and future generations alike. The World Bank projects that, by 2030, climate change could plunge over 100 million people back into extreme poverty, with a considerable portion of this impact being attributed to detrimental effects on health.

The evidence is irrefutable. We have recently experienced the hottest summer on record, characterized by extreme heat waves, rampant wildfires, and escalating ocean temperatures, and other climatic events—many of which are the consequences of human actions.

Given that we are gathered here in Rwanda, it is crucial to emphasize the immediate and lasting impacts of these climate-related events in the continent of Africa. The World Health Organization states that the continent experiences over 100 health emergencies each year, making up a staggering 70% of all natural disasters recorded between 2017 and 2021.

Ladies and gentlemen, We are at a tipping point. Accelerated action is needed now more than ever. WMA will continue to call for divestment away from fossil fuels and focus on building resilient, sustainable healthcare systems. We can't afford to wait; the time for action is now.

Food Systems

The state of our food systems is nothing short of alarming. Diet-related illnesses have become the number one driver of ill health and premature deaths globally. A staggering 1 in 5 deaths are linked to unhealthy diets. Nearly 4 billion people, that is more than one-third of the world's population, struggle to access healthy diets and 1 in 3 people on the planet is malnourished. This situation is exacerbated by climate change and the destruction of nature. The human cost is mind-blowing, and the economic costs are equally devastating. The annual economic burden of unhealthy diets is up 3.5 trillion USD per year

Hunger is also a critical issue; the number of chronically hungry people is on the rise, estimated at around 800 million in 2020. The future looks bleak for over 100 million stunted children who will never reach their full potential, both physically and mentally.

Our current food systems are not only killing us but are also devastating our planet. They are responsible for about one-third of our total emissions and are the principal driver of the global extinction crisis, loss of biological diversity, and destruction of nature.

As physicians and healthcare professionals, we have a significant role to play in addressing these challenges. We must be proactive in conducting dietary assessments, providing professional counsel, and supporting education and training. But most importantly, we must drive major advocacy efforts to transform food systems for the better.

Universal Health Coverage (UHC)

Now, let's imagine a world where everyone, everywhere, has access to safe, good-quality, and free healthcare service whenever needed. This is not a utopian dream; it is a basic human right that the world is tragically failing to fulfill. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored and exacerbated existing shortcomings, underscoring the imperative need for healthcare systems that are robust, equitable, and resilient.

Establishing such inclusive systems is pivotal for achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) and fortifying health security. It contributes to broader socioeconomic progress and offers an opportunity for more and better-directed investment in the foundations of health systems. An integrated approach, based on primary health care, is vital to ensure that no one is left behind.

WMA will continue to urge governments to provide excellent and safe working conditions and prioritize health worker protections. Decent working conditions must include fair, equal, consistent, and timely pay for all health workers.

Furthermore, healthcare professionals, especially women and youth, need to be protected from work-related violence and harassment. We call on governments to act to prevent and eliminate such brutality by providing an appropriate physical environment and by developing and implementing zero-tolerance laws.

UHC will not be achieved without a holistic primary healthcare approach. It serves as the initial point of contact for individuals within the health system, providing a platform for prevention, early diagnosis, and treatment. It's a cost-effective approach that prioritizes equity and accessibility, ensuring that healthcare reaches the most vulnerable and remote populations. By integrating various healthcare services, from maternal and child health to chronic disease management, it creates a patient-centered model that promotes long-term health and well-being for all.

Emerging Technologies and Impact on Medicine

As we embrace the age of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies, we stand at the cusp of a revolution in healthcare. These advancements have the potential to radically enhance healthcare delivery, diagnostics, and patient management. However, it is imperative that we approach this new era with caution to ensure that these technologies serve to improve healthcare, rather than complicate or compromise it.

WMA will delve into the ethical and practical implications of assimilating these technologies into healthcare. Attention must be given to data privacy, bias, and the potential displacement of healthcare workers. As physicians, we have an ethical responsibility to ensure the transparent and equitable implementation of these technologies, maintaining adherence to the highest medical ethics and standards.

It is pivotal for WMA to be at the forefront of this transformative era. By pioneering the incorporation of emerging technologies in healthcare, we can establish

guidelines and protocols that uphold the integrity of medical practice. This leading role will also empower us to advocate for policies that safeguard both healthcare professionals and patients, while promoting innovations that enhance the entire healthcare ecosystem.

Youth

It is a common saying, 'youth are the future leaders,' but I find this notion somewhat constraining. It seems to suggest that the youth should patiently await their turn to enact significant change.

My journey to the presidency of WMA initiated within the Junior Doctors Network. It was there that my passion and dedication to advocating for enhanced health through organized medicine were cultivated. I am determined to stand by and support the network's ambitious and innovative members who continually bring substantial value to our organization.

I am a fervent advocate for intergenerational equality, particularly in leadership roles. The voices of the younger generation are resounding, potent, and have already demonstrated their capability to make a substantial impact.

Recognizing the value in this, it's paramount to appreciate that every generation brings its unique insights and valuable experiences.

When we all—irrespective of age—work together, we create more effective and inclusive approaches to healthcare and leadership.

In this cooperative and inclusive environment, we discover a synergy where diverse perspectives and experiences unite, enabling us to achieve outcomes that are far richer and more impactful than what we could accomplish individually.

Conclusion

In closing, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the Medical Association of Rwanda for hosting this General Assembly. Thank you for your hospitality, generosity and welcoming us to your beautiful country.

We stand at a critical juncture—a world in crossroads—as physicians, we bear a tremendous responsibility to maintain and protect the health and well-being of all people.

As we look toward the future, let us remember that the practice of medicine is not just a profession; it is a calling that transcends borders, cultures, and languages. I take this mantle of leadership humbly, ever mindful of the gravity and importance it holds to steer this esteemed organization in expanding its reach, impact, and relevance in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

I feel this responsibility even more now, not just because I have just been inaugurated to lead the WMA, but also as a new mother to my daughter Yasmin. It reminds me that the work we do today is not just for us, but for the generations that follow.

Thank you.