

Address by Dr. C. Rangarajan, Governor of Andhra Pradesh as Chief Guest at the Symposium on Costs of Poor Health Habits organised by the Institute of Health Systems at HACA Bhavan, Hyderabad on April 7, 2002 at 9:30 AM.

I am indeed very happy to be in your midst this morning to inaugurate the symposium on "Costs of Poor Health Habits" organised by the Institute of Health Systems on the occasion of the World Health Day. The theme chosen by the organisers is very timely and appropriate. People normally are oblivious to the harmful effects of poor health habits such as lack of exercise, smoking and excessive drinking. They realise their mistakes too late to do them any good. I am, therefore, happy that the Institute of Health Systems which is doing pioneering work on different aspects of health care systems has chosen to organise this symposium to bring to the attention of the general public the importance of wholesome health habits.

Good health is fundamental to the well-being of the people and the nation. People constitute the best asset of a country. However, they can give out their best only if they remain healthy. "Sound mind in a sound body" is a proverb that we have all learnt at school. There is an old Sanskrit saying which goes even further:

"Dharmartha, Kama Mokshanam, Arogyam Mulam Uttamam"

It was clearly recognized that health was the chief basis for human development in all its dimensions.

This symposium focuses on the costs of three bad health habits - sedentary lifestyle, heavy drinking and smoking. The theme chosen by World Health Organization for this year's World Health Day is "Move for Health". This theme emphasizes the importance of physical exercise in ensuring good health. It is found that lack of physical activity is a major cause of many non-communicable diseases. It is estimated that sedentary life styles are responsible for over two million deaths in the world every year. About 25 per cent of early deaths because of heart disease are due to inactive lifestyles. Even in our country, while we are still battling the problem of under nutrition, obesity is already showing up among the middle class. A study conducted by the Nutrition Foundation of India found that in Delhi about 32 per cent middle class men and 50 percent of middle class women are obese. It is unfortunate that modern day living is leading people to adopt a sedentary lifestyle. The agricultural society and even the early industrial society demanded hard physical work. But the transition to knowledge society is making big changes in life style. At work, there is very little of physical activity. Even at leisure there is not much physical activity. People are taking elevators instead of climbing stairs. Recreation, which at one time meant sports or participation in cultural activities, is increasingly making people "couch potatoes", as they watch TV glued to their sofa sets. In fact, as one critic commented, children watch more cricket on the TV than play in the fields. Everybody above two years of age whether male or female, young or old, needs physical activity. Sedentary life can be the bane of modern society.

The ill effects of smoking are too well known to be repeated. The consumption of tobacco in any form is harmful. The use of tobacco in our country is very wide spread. It is estimated that around 40 per cent of Indian males over 15 years of age are addicted to smoking. 50 per cent of male cancer and 23 per cent of female cancer are related to tobacco use. In fact, smoking harms not only the people who smoke but also those who are around them, sometimes described as "passive smokers".

Heavy drinking of alcohol is emerging as a major health problem. There is very clear evidence that heavy drinking is dangerous to health. Estimates show that every year alcoholism is responsible for over 2 million deaths in the world. In addition almost 16 million people are disabled. According to one study, in India 40 to 50 percent of males over 15 years of age consume alcohol. At least 2.25 crore Indians are problem drinkers. In addition to being a major risk factor for chronic liver, gastrointestinal, cardiac and mental diseases, alcoholism is responsible for 25 per cent of suicides and 25 per cent of all road traffic accidents in India.

Economists always want to quantify everything. Several attempts have been made to estimate the costs of poor health habits. These costs can be broken up into direct and indirect or external. The direct costs are those borne by the society. The external costs include not only the costs incurred by public health system, but also the cost arising from loss of life or injury caused to others such as those resulting from drunken driving. These costs are not easy to calculate. The problems that are faced are similar to the ones economists encounter in social cost-benefit analysis studies. Nevertheless, it is very clear that the costs due to poor health habits are real and enormous. There are monetary costs as well as physical pain and suffering.

What then should be the agenda of action? Though it is the individual who makes the lifestyle choices, poor health habits are not merely about individual behavior. Factors like easy availability, social acceptability, peer pressure, influence of advertisements and marketing strategies and a host of socioeconomic and political factors influence habits like smoking and drinking. Similarly crowding, crime, traffic, poor air quality, lack of recreation facilities and sidewalks make physical activity a difficult choice for many people. The challenge of prevention is therefore as much the responsibility of governments as it is of the people. Thus, it is important that advocacy must move beyond individuals and reach policy makers.

In the case of physical activity, the role of the individual in altering the life style is important. As a matter of fact, there is not sufficient awareness among people, particularly in the middle age group of the consequence of sedentary life. When people are young, they tend to ignore the possible harmful effects of lack of exercise which may show up much later in life. Awareness programmes must be initiated so that people become conscious of the need to allot time to do physical activity. Regular and regulated physical exercises can save people from falling a prey to many diseases. Clubs and community organizations must bring home to people the advantages of adopting a physically active life. Needless to say, physical activity must be an integral part of college and school education. Students must be encouraged to participate in various not only to win laurels but also to maintain a healthy physique. Municipal and local Government authorities must set aside enough places where physical exercise can be done comfortably and without the hazards of fast moving vehicles. Perhaps, the most serious lacuna

now is the proper understanding of the dangers of leading a sedentary life. Awareness programmes are thus fundamental in this area.

To prevent people from smoking, awareness programmes must be supplemented by appropriate legislation. The Bill recently passed by Andhra Pradesh Legislature prohibiting smoking in public areas is an important step in combating the tobacco menace. Strong anti-tobacco legislation is common in many countries. Media support in a large measure is required to control the spread of tobacco habit. Cigarette manufacturers must be compelled to conform to certain standards in their advertisements. Entertainment industry must be extremely cautious in the portrayal of characters so as not to give the impression that smoking is a status symbol or a symbol of expressing one's freedom and independence. These wrong connotations if propagated can mislead people. Formal schemes to educate the public about the consequences of smoking must be put in place. This must also counter the false propaganda on the "virtues" of smoking that some tobacco companies may propagate. Legal prohibition of smoking is not a feasible proposition. However, the dangers of smoking need to be brought home to the people in a telling manner. Good educational programmes have had a decisive effect in many countries.

Excessive drinking has brought ruin to many families, particularly in the lower income groups. If the breadwinner spends much of his income on alcohol, the wife is left with very little income to run the family. Heavy drinking also leads to fights at home and outside. We need strong laws limiting the days, hours, places and conditions of alcohol sale and service. Restrictions need to be imposed on alcohol advertisements. However, the laws will work only when there is a broad realization in the society about the deleterious effects of drinking. I strongly feel that we need to establish special organizations for counseling people who are addicted to heavy drinking. A broad-based temperance campaign needs to be initiated. There is now really no active programme of propaganda on the evils of drinking. I do hope that the Institute of Health Systems will think of a proper mechanism of communication to impress on the people, particularly low income groups of the dangers of excessive drinking. A network of societies is required, if we are to succeed in this area. An intensive campaign against drinking has to be mounted in all seriousness.

I congratulate the Chairman of the Institute, Dr. Hrishikesh, the Director, Dr. Mahapatra and all his colleagues on the very fine work that they are doing. Ignorance is not bliss. To make people aware of the dangers of poor health habits is an urgent necessity. Sedentary life, smoking and heavy drinking can cause serious damage to society. Alarm bells are ringing. The wake up call is loud and clear. Let us answer it by mounting an educational movement that will spell out the dangers of poor health habits and stress the importance of a positive life style.

Thank you.