

International Day of Older Persons

2 October 2017

Your Excellency Ambassador Ihara, Your Excellency Ambassador Wannamethee, distinguished guests, colleagues, friends,

It is no secret that populations around the world are ageing rapidly.

This is cause for celebration, because it means that fewer people are dying too young from preventable diseases.

But too often, older people are seen as dependents to be put in a nursing home, instead of a valued and integral part of society.

The knowledge and skills that older people develop over a lifetime are valuable resources.

With retraining and reorienting, older people can continue to contribute to national development in many ways – and we all benefit.

Countries such as Singapore and Japan are already leading the way on this.

So instead of talking about a “silver tsunami”, we should talk about a “silver dividend”.

That’s why I’m so pleased with the theme chosen for this year’s International Day of the Older Person: “Stepping into the Future: Tapping the Talents, Contributions and Participation of Older Persons in Society.”

But of course, in order for anyone in a society to participate and contribute, including older people, they must have good health.

Let me remind you that in Goal 3 of the Sustainable Development Goals, the world has committed to, “Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all, at all ages”.

The best way to achieve that goal is universal health coverage. That means ensuring that older people have access to the services they need, when and where they need them, without facing financial hardship.

Today there are many barriers that limit the access of older people to health services, particularly in lower-income countries and among disadvantaged people in higher-income countries.

And when services are available, they are often fragmented or poorly suited to the needs of older people.

Older age is associated with a higher risk of multiple, overlapping chronic conditions. Evidence shows that coordinated care guided by a comprehensive assessment ensures much better outcomes than services that simply respond independently to each condition.

Yet current health services are often designed to cure individual conditions, rather than provide the integrated chronic care older people need.

Developing new ways of delivering integrated care for older people will be a critical challenge for governments around the world. A core emphasis must be on primary care.

The Global Strategy on Ageing and Health that Member States adopted last year calls on all countries to lay the foundations for systems of long-term care.

Outdated approaches that rely solely on families for care provision tend to place an unfair burden on poorer families and on women in particular.

The Strategy proposes that new approaches are needed that are based on a partnership between families and government, as well as many other paid and unpaid caregivers.

The emphasis should be on providing care and support in people’s homes and communities, rather than focusing on institutional care.

We will need to be very innovative in how we how we develop the integrated health and social services of the future.

Countries such as Chile, France, Japan, Nigeria, Thailand and Vietnam are making progress, and offer good examples for all of us to learn from.

WHO stands ready to help countries learn from best practices, and to advise countries on how to ensure services are meeting the needs of older people.

We all have a vested interest in ensuring we provide the best possible health services for older people.

Because in the end, we are building the health systems that we ourselves will need in just a few years' time.

Thank you.