

Opening remarks by Dr. Myint Htwe, Union Minister for Health and Sports, at the
46th Myanmar Health Research Congress

Department of Medical Research, Yangon

8–12, January, 2018

Mingalabar! Good morning!

- It is my distinct privilege and honor to give the opening remarks at this august gathering of professionals, senior officials from various departments under the Ministry of Health and Sports (MoHS), rectors, professors, research scientists, and distinguished guests from Myanmar and from abroad, who are here to attend this annually held Myanmar Health Research Congress.
- At the very outset, I would like to say that it is an effective knowledge and experience sharing platform among the researchers, administrators and officials of the MoHS.
- All of us have should make the most out of it by applying some of the findings in real practice either in clinical domain or public health domain.
- I have also noted that the quality of research papers as well as the posters presented in this congress had improved to a higher degree of our satisfaction.
- The numbers of research papers are also increasing yearly. This is a good sign for the MoHS indicating that the research culture is somewhat properly rooted in our country. But we will still need to nurture it so that it can grow well in the years to come.
- The central theme of this year Health Research Congress is “To prevent, detect, treat and live with cancer”. In the era of increasing incidence of NCD in our country, this theme exactly meets the requirement of our country. This is especially important as one of the inputs for achieving the UHC goals. More research activities are needed for effective prevention and control of various forms of cancer.

- Today, I am proud to mention the fact that the National Health Research Policy had been approved by the cabinet recently. This can easily pave a way for developing a framework and as well as a road map for the field of health research in our country.
- I would like to mention one particular point, i.e., health research is not an entity inherent to the professionals working in the Department of Medical Research.
- This notion must be removed totally.
- We, the senior officials of departments under MoHS, must promote research in a collaborative manner. Research should be conducted by all categories of staff members working in various departments of the MoHS, who show interest in research.
- We need to create enabling environments for conducting research in various departments under MoHS. However, it is easier said than done.
- I would like our staff to conduct research as much as possible. The reason being that “one of the side benefits of conducting research is development of critical and analytical thinking skill among the staff.
- The researchers always need to think from relevant perspective in different situations and always need to ask why? Why not? Is that so? How could it be? Is there any other way to overcome this?
- Such types of questions can create or nurture the capability and capacity of a researcher. This could help in many other ways when they perform their routine or newly assigned tasks.
- Research is a public good where all staff, irrespective of the departments in which they are assigned, has the inherent right to conduct research.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- In that context, I would like to apprise Myanmar participants attending this research congress that the government had allocated one billion kyats for the fiscal year 2017–2018 for promotion of health research in our country.
- Never in the history of MoH, we got this amount of budget for health research. We have to thank the government especially due to the fact that there are limitations in the overall budget availability and allocation, and also our country is not that rich.
- It is our duty to rationally allocate and use this research budget most wisely and judiciously. I call on my colleague researchers to follow this principle of “wise and judicious” use of research budget following the framework of “Responsible Conduct of Research”
- For the developing country like Myanmar, this sum is significant in a sense that we do not need a huge amount of money for conducting basic research in Myanmar except for certain research areas.
- For the full budget cycle (newly changed fiscal cycle) starting October 2018 for 2018–2019 budget year, we are expecting to get at least equal or more than one billion Kyats for research.
- We are also getting 500 million kyats for research for the interim six-month budget cycle from April to September 2018.
- This budget is primarily intended to use in strengthening capacity and capability of researchers in terms of the following subjects.
 - i. Establishment of good research management practice,
 - ii. Practice of responsible conduct of research,
 - iii. Promoting application of ICH GCP guidelines and clinical trials,
 - iv. Strictly practicing research ethics,

- v. Increasing the capacity of members of Ethical Review Committees or Institutional Review Boards in the universities and some departments under MoHS,
 - vi. Development of national health research agenda (involving MMA, MDA, MAMS, MNMA, MHA, Departments under MoHS, etc.)
 - vii. Funding support for conducting implementation research
- For this current budget cycle of 2017-2018 ending 31 March 2018, we have almost finished distributing the budget of one billion kyats to many research proposals submitted to MoHS.
 - I was informed that the balance is 900 lakhs kyats. Here, I would urge the principal investigators of already funded research projects to strictly abide by the principles of Responsible Conduct of Research.
 - For 2018/2019 fiscal year, we plan to have a reasonably acceptable and realistic criteria and framework for funding research proposals submitted by our staff members.
 - Here, I would urge our staff members to conduct more implementation research for increasing the efficiency of management, administrative, logistics perspectives of program delivery and also for improving technical perspectives of various programs being carried out in MoHS.
 - I would also like to request the non-medical or administrative and finance staff to conduct research. We have funds to support this.
 - The notion in our MoHS is that only medical doctors can and should do research. We have to change that line of thinking once and for all.
 - By utilizing the findings of our research projects, the overall efficiency of MoHS can be effectively and greatly improved.
 - Another area that we should do is to increase the capacity of our new recruits of researchers or newly joined medical doctors.

- We need to plan carefully and do it in a systematic manner and also applying innovative approaches. “Business as usual” approach will not be effective.
- As we have to adjust to the changing circumstances or changing epidemiological situation, we need to streamline and adjust our strategies and approaches for promoting health research in our country accordingly.
- For this year 2018, we should promote research culture, research environment and research capacity in the universities and departments under MoHS.
- We should also do a quick review of the utility and beneficial effects (long term and short term) of conducting this yearly Myanmar Health Research Congress by the Department of Medical Research. We can easily expose this scenario by conducting FGDs and key informant interviews.
- We can easily develop a framework for such a study. I would urge the Department of Medical Research to start initiating this after this Congress.
- INGOs and local NGOs are also urged to conduct research as much as possible in our country but within the purview of the MOU signed between INGO and MoHS.
- However, before conducting any research study by any INGO or local NGO, it is mandatory (I repeat mandatory) to get approval from Ethics Review Committees or Institutional Review Boards (IRB) of Department of Medical Research or University of Public Health in Yangon.
- It is not allowed to conduct any type of research study inside the territory of our country without the approval of the ERC/IRB as alluded to earlier. This point is particularly emphasized because we found many studies being conducted without ERC/IRB approval especially in Rakhine state.
- Conducting research study without the approval of ERC/IRB of DMR or UPH is tantamount to “research findings are null and void” and we will not honor the findings. These results should also not be referred to our country’s overall health scenario. In legal terms, it is illegal.

Dear colleague researchers,

- I would like to request the professionals of Department of Medical Research and senior faculty members of 16 universities of medicine and related disciplines to chalk out the road map for capacity building on research for undergraduate and postgraduate students attending the universities. We need to do it in a phase-wise, step-wise and in a systematic manner without fail.
- Hundreds of health research studies or projects were conducted as part of the requirement for master and doctoral theses in the universities under MOHS.
- It is worthwhile to analyze in terms of several parameters on all these studies and projects carried out during the last 5 years or so.
- The Department of Medical Research may wish to develop a “Framework of Analysis” together with required guidelines and share it with respective universities for analyzing it.
- The findings of this review will be very beneficial as an input to strategizing future directions of our health research domain.
- We have been contemplating and discussing about promoting research culture in our universities. It is time to review to what extent have we done on this aspect ? Are we successful in doing it? Is it really effective or any noticeable improvement seen?
- If not, we have to do some innovative thinking or out-of-the-box thinking, instead of doing business-as-usual approach. Let us think collectively!
- Another area which I would like to further promote is to increase the level of collaborative research with like-minded universities, organizations, associations, foundations and institutions outside the country. We may need to collaborate with pharmaceutical companies and private sector also.
- The best way is to do joint research or multi-centric research studies. Conducting such multi-centric studies will benefit both the parties. The MoHS is

more than ready to support this initiative. I would suggest the professionals from outside the countries attending this conference to discuss with Myanmar health research professionals and consider initiating more multi-centric studies.

- There are more than 40 or so WHO collaborative projects or programs run by MoHS. The Program Directors and Project Managers may wish to consider having built-in implementation research studies in their respective areas.
- This is to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of administrative, management, logistics perspectives of respective projects or programs. Please take my advice seriously.

Dear fellow researchers,

- We have recently developed Health Research Information System (HRIS) in the Department of Medical Research. I would like to congratulate the Department of Medical Research for this initiative.
- We should not stop here. It is essential to review the existing framework of HRIS and improve it further and make it comprehensive.
- The information coming out from the HRIS must be compulsorily reviewed and analyzed from time to time and adjust our health research strategies. The analogy is that HRIS for research domain is like a central nervous system to the human body.
- I would like our research domain in our country to be dynamic and responsive to the need of the country.
- We now have the National Health Research Policy approved by the cabinet recently. It is now time to find out whether our national health research strategies and activities are in line with the spectrum of our newly formulated National Health Research Strategies.

- I am sure that professionals of the Department of Medical Research in collaboration with relevant professionals from the service departments under MoHS will soon be scrutinizing it.
- I would like to propose some of the research areas which you may wish to consider in 2018.
- Procurement and distribution system and efficiency of medical supplies and equipment to various states/regions
- Changing pattern of disease occurrence, communicable as well as non-communicable diseases, in terms of various parameters in states and regions of the country
- Health budget allocation pattern in the MoHS to various entities
- Distribution *versus* production of all categories of human resource for health
- Management and governance system in the MoHS
- Location of health institutions in various parts of the country *versus* patient load pattern *versus* disease occurrence pattern
- Detailed performance/efficiency of community health clinics, rural health centers and sub-rural health centers
- Logistics and patient flow pattern inside the hospital for various categories of hospitals in the country
- Emergency room administration and management in hospitals

Dear colleague researchers,

- Another area which I would like to do is strengthening the health research registry platform. The development of national (health) research registry must be complemented with formation of “Research Oversight Committee”.
- If questions are put forward to MoHS such as: “What types of research or proportion of research studies were conducted by MoHS or budget allocated to various categories research studies that were conducted in Myanmar during the

last 5 years or so in our country? MoHS will be in a difficult position to respond to those questions accurately.

- It is very important for senior management to know these facts for rightly formulating health research strategies or for rationally allocating research funds in future.
- Only then, the whole research domain in our country can be improved equitably.
- Therefore, I would like to propose DMR to do Health Research Resource Flow Analysis. Resource means human resource as well as financial resource. Without that resource flow information, we would be wasting our hard earned budget because our decisions will be based on a plethora of unsubstantiated or weak or speculated information.
- Showing the number of research studies being done or completed is one form of success indicators of an institution or organization, assuming that research areas being tackled are relevant to the need of the country at that particular point in time.
- If this can be supplemented by the points which I mentioned earlier, we can establish an excellent research domain in our country to support overall national health development on our path to UHC and SDG.
- The research scenario in Myanmar is a bit unique in a sense that it is under the control of MoHS. In future years, research institution such as Department of Medical Research should be an independent research institution, not calling as a department. To make it happen the Department of Medical Research must be very strong, dynamic and responsive.
- I am expecting that all the points alluded to earlier may be considered and action taken. To a certain extent before the next Health Research Congress.

- Last but not the least; I congratulate the members of the main organizing committee and various sub-committees of the Congress for making the 46th Myanmar Health Research Congress a reality.
- In conclusion, I just would like to propose the researchers “Let us research together to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the health care delivery system on our path to UHC and achieving SDG”
- Thank you.