

**Opening Remarks by Dr. Myint Htwe, Union Minister for Health and Sports at the
45th Myanmar Health Research Congress**

Department of Medical Research, Yangon.

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Mingalabar!

- Research Scientists from the Ministry of Health and Sports, Research Scientists from abroad, specially invited guests, senior officials from the Ministry of Health and Sports, Rectors and Professors from health Institutions in Myanmar, upcoming research scientists, Ladies and Gentlemen,
- It is my distinct privilege to deliver the opening remarks at the 45th Myanmar Health Research Congress, which is a yearly landmark event in the field of health research in Myanmar.
- The Department of Medical Research is coordinating, leading and managing for the smooth conduct of this Myanmar Health Research Congress in collaboration with various departments under MoHS and senior research scientists in Myanmar and abroad for several years.
- The quality of research papers presented, posters displayed, as well as the spectrum of disciplines under the rubric of health research covered, and the range of countries where research scientists attended the Congress are also increasing yearly.
- This is a good sign that reflects the progress and success of the Congress in terms of promoting health research in Myanmar.
- It is a fact that development of a research domain is directly proportional to the

development of a country. In that context, we can confidently say that our country is on the right track on our way to becoming a prosperous country.

- In order to achieve this and to be sustainable, we need to invest in health research not only from the perspective of research funding but also in terms of research infrastructure and especially human resources to conduct research.
- At the same time, we need to nurture our young research scientists seriously, effectively and systematically by way of developing a “Health Research Workforce Development Strategic Plan”.
- One of the quickest and cost effective ways to have well qualified and full-fledged research scientists is to put in place “Research Mentorship” or “Mentor – Mentee programs” in the Department of Medical Research. This could directly or indirectly result in firmly establishing a research culture among the professionals or research scientists involved in it.
- Many research institutions in developing countries are performing their research works as per the resources available. However, it is essential that “Research Resource Flow Analysis” must be conducted every now and then. This could clearly depict and expose whether we are rationally and appropriately allocating the available funding resources to different sub-domains or disciplines in health research vis-a-vis research requirement.
- There are several instances where funding resources are diverted to areas which are not a priority for the country for that period of time. This fact is especially important for developing countries where resources are limited. Myanmar is no exception.

- The MoHS will significantly increase the allocation of health research budget in 2017 / 2018 budget year, which is starting in April 2017.
- The purpose of this increase is to promote clinical research and establishment of clinical research units in big hospitals all over the country.
- Through conduct of clinical research, we intend to improve the clinical acumen of doctors, nurses and allied health professionals and also for achieving good clinical management of patients. Rendering quality medical care to patients is one of the aims of the MoHS.
- At the same time, we intend to reinforce the existing ones and establish new “Ethical Review Committees” or “Institutional Review Boards” in big hospitals to take care of their own clinical research agenda.
- Another area which is somewhat weak in developing countries, including Myanmar, is health research information system. Myanmar is on track to improve the health research information system. But we need to put more efforts to make the system more responsive, robust and comprehensive.
- We will expand the Health Research Information System to include other disciplines or domains such as social research, ecological research, economics research, development research, and overall policy research as pertained to the field of health.
- I hope that this research Congress will either directly or indirectly stimulate the development and progress of research areas other than health.
- We are in the midst of formulating National Health Plan (2017–2021) involving all stakeholders. The basic framework has already been approved by the MoHS.

- The development of its operational plan will be completed by middle of March, 2017 and the plan will start on 1st April 2017. Here, we intend to include several implementation research activities to improve the performance of various health programs of the MoHS.
- At this juncture, I would like to urge our Myanmar researchers to contemplate submitting research protocols to Department of Medical Research for conducting implementation research to improve performance of various health programs of MoHS from the perspective of management, administrative, logistics and technical.
- We have a plan to meet research scientists from the Department of Medical Research and health professionals from various service departments of MoHS very soon in Nay Pyi Taw to chalk out the research road map in our National Health Plan.
- My long term vision is to make the Department of Medical Research to be an independent research institution in the country. It will take some time as we need to build up our capacity and capability of research scientists in the Department of Medical Research in line with the characteristics of an independent research institution.
- Some of the characteristics of independent health research institution, among others, that we would try to reinforce or achieve for future years are:
 - (i) having a good health research management practice together with guidelines and standard operating procedures for various research related issues,
 - (ii) establishing two to three capable and technically strong Ethical Review Committees functioning smoothly,

- (iii) availability of several updated guidelines for “Responsible Conduct of Research”,
 - (iv) establishing comprehensive Health Research Information System and Health Research Registry,
 - (v) regular intra-mural and extra-mural health research capacity building activities,
 - (vi) availability of Institutional Ethical Guidelines,
 - (vii) having a good health research monitoring system,
 - (viii) regular annual reports together with an analytical section,
 - (ix) conducting regular research talks, symposiums, debates, panel discussion platforms, etc.,
 - (x) producing its own research journal,
 - (xi) having its own research policy, plan, strategies and activities,
 - (xii) having a reasonable quantum of budget to run the institution by itself,
 - (xiii) in-country as well as outside the country strong networking with other research institutions,
 - (xiv) efficient financial and research audit system, etc.
- We are hoping and expecting that all these will be achieved sooner rather than later under the guidance of the head of the current Department of Medical Research. We have also achieved many of these entities alluded earlier by our research scientists.
 - The MoHS will give overall policy and technical guidance without reservation. We will try to achieve all these elements in a phase-wise and step-wise manner.

- It is also heartening to note that Department of Medical Research has retained its status of “WHO Collaborating Center for Research and Training on Malaria” in June 2016. However, we should not be complacent about achieving this WHO Collaborating Center status.
- We need to review or do introspection regarding the output of the center in terms of contributing something new or exciting in the area of malaria domain.
- To achieve this, we need to work closely with National Malaria Control Program and also do serious networking with other institutions doing malaria research. The MoHS is more than willing to give further support in making this WHO Collaborating Center becoming the good image of the country as well as contributing something useful for the country.
- Myanmar is aiming to achieve Universal Health Coverage and as we progress towards this end, we would like the Department of Medical Research to give a helping hand in our endeavor to achieve Universal Health Coverage and also for effectively serving the population at large. It is important that built-in research activities must be incorporated in various health programs in the country.
- If we really want to improve the health research domain in the country, immediate attention must be given to review the curriculum of universities and schools of medicine, public health, community health, dental, medical technology, pharmacy, traditional medicine, and nursing in terms of inclusion of research areas such as research methodology, research ethics, research management, responsible conduct of research, research utilization. We will also do this in the coming months and years.
- As far as I could recall, the subject matter on research is not given enough

emphasis as it should be in many of our health institutions. We will work out so that research subject is appropriately discussed and taught in the coming years in the universities and schools as mentioned above.

- The 45th Myanmar Health Research Congress will be discussing on 103 research papers, and also displaying 56 research posters. I was informed that there will be 11 symposiums and 1 scientific talk. The topics not only include nutrition but also touch upon important areas such as molecular diagnostics in point-of-care testing, accreditation of laboratories for international recognition, updates on various cancers, travel medicine, hospital waste management, infectious diseases, multiple drug resistant tuberculosis and its control and malaria elimination. All these topics are very interesting and important for the country.
- I am sure that there will be a cascading effect in stimulating the upcoming young researchers who are attending this Congress so that more research projects are envisaged in the future.
- Here, I would like to highlight one point which is “Posters displayed are equally as important as research papers presented in the congress”. Several new avenues for research can be exposed to do further research out of the findings shown in the displayed posters.
- One of the advantages of a poster is that we can have a bird’s eye view of the research questions involved in the study and its findings. Some of the findings may seem trivial but they may be key or strategic factors which can lead to solving a particular challenge or problem in the community.
- I am also glad to note the fact that the main theme of this Congress is “Improving the Nutrition Status and Reduction of Stunting in Myanmar children”.

- This is indeed an opportune time to focus towards nutrition as effective interventions are urgently needed to achieve Sustainable Development Goal number 2, which states that “End hunger, achieve food security, improved nutrition and sustainable agriculture”.
- Malnutrition among the children, especially in remote and hard-to- reach or underserved areas, is one of the challenges that Myanmar is facing to overcome it with using all available means. We will explore some innovative, practical, cost-effective and cost-efficient strategies to tackle it successfully.
- “Young Researchers Award” will be given at the end of the Congress. It is a stimulating agenda to make our research foundation strong and robust and can lead to production of a cohort of promising young researchers, who will be leaders in health research in Myanmar. This practice must be continued.
- Here, I would like to propose that, subject to the availability of funding and time of research scientists, we should have one-day miniature research symposiums in all states and regions in our country.
- These symposiums can cover research topics relevant to respective states and regions. The MoHS is determined to put this activity in place very soon in collaboration with Social Ministers of States and Regions, State and Regional Public Health and Medical Services Directors, local branches of Myanmar Medical Association, like minded organizations and INGOs.
- The research professionals from the Department of Medical Research can serve as prime movers to make it happen. I am confident that it will stimulate many young and research minded professionals from states and regions to venture into the field of health research domain.

- Promoting health research in states and regions of the country is essential. The long term dividend thereby yielded for overall health development of our country will be enormous. I have alluded to earlier that country's development goes parallel with research development in the country. Therefore, MoHS is determined to promote health research in the country.
- The MoHS will further explore funding support to be made available from the World Health Organization, some INGOs, agencies and foundations working in the country so that health research in states and regions can be promoted.
- I am also pleased to mention that our latest version of National Health Research Policy and Strategies will be approved very soon by the Cabinet. I was also involved deeply in formulating this policy and strategies before I became the Minister for Health and Sports.
- Following this, we will have clear cut guidance in further promoting the research domain in our country. We will also strive for having a National Ethical Guidelines for use in Ethics Review Committees (ERC) in several health institutions, universities and schools in our country.
- Specifically, the Department of Medical Research should have updated guidelines for good Research Management practice and Responsible Conduct of Research for use by its own researchers. The MoHS is also considering for establishing a "Health Research Oversight Committee" to oversee all health research activities being conducted in the country and give policy and strategic guidance to further put the health research domain high in the country.
- The conduct of clinical trials is another area that we need to give emphasis in our country as new combination of treatment regimens is put in place and newer drugs

are being imported. We need to work closely with pharmaceutical industries so that it will be in line with the International Conference on Harmonization – Good Clinical practice (ICH – GCP) guidelines.

- The principles and practice of clinical trials must also be included in the curriculum of MPH, M Med Sc (Medicine) and M Med Sc (Public Health) post graduate courses.
- As far as I could recall, very few clinical trials are being conducted in our country. Many of the studies are KAP studies and we also know the pros and cons of these so called KAP studies. I would prefer to have more interventional research studies, comparative interventional research studies being conducted to assess the benefits of new approaches or new interventions or combination of interventions rather than KAP studies.
- Another area that we may need to do at this point in time is to establish a “Health Research Registry” for our country. As a first step we may deal with health research and health related research only. It will be expanded to cover other areas as well. Research Registry is one of the prerequisites for giving proper guidance for venturing new research areas to be conducted in the country.

In conclusion, I would like the following to happen.

- (i) the health research community in Myanmar to work cohesively for the betterment of health and health research domain in our country;
- (ii) to further explore and strengthen networking with research institutions, universities and schools in other countries, both developed and developing countries;
- (iii) updating the institutional guidelines and standard operating procedures on

various research issues;

- (iv) strengthening ties with relevant WHO Collaborating centers all over the world;
 - (v) Department of Medical Research to involve and support the research activities associated in improving the performance of Departments of Human Resource for Health, Traditional Medicine, Food and Drug Authority, Medical Services, Public Health and Sports and Physical Education.
 - (vi) Research should be part and parcel of the work of each department under the Ministry of Health and Sports, especially for conducting implementation research,
 - (vii) Universities and schools under Ministry of Health and Sports to conduct more research,
 - (viii) the last, but not the least, which seems to be very important is to promote capacity building of upcoming young researchers in our country.
- My take home message is “Professionals of Department of Medical Research should be the one who should serve as a strategic information provider for improving the performance of the Ministry of Health and Sports”.

(The speech is prepared by the Union Minister himself)