

**Opening Address**  
**Global Alliance against Chronic Respiratory Diseases**  
**(GARD)**  
**Dr Henk Bekedam, WHO Representative in China**

28 March 2006

Your Excellency, Dr Wang Longde, Vice Minister for Health,  
Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Good Morning.

On behalf of the World Health Organization, I would like to welcome you to the General Meeting of the Global Alliance against Chronic Respiratory Diseases (GARD). We are gathered here as a voluntary alliance from 41 different organizations, institutions, and agencies, with one common vision – to work towards improving lung health worldwide, and to make the right to breathe freely a reality for all of us throughout the world.

Hundreds of millions of people worldwide suffer from chronic respiratory diseases and each year over four million die from chronic respiratory diseases. Chronic respiratory diseases cause substantial socio-economic burdens on both individuals and societies. Moreover, chronic respiratory diseases are insufficiently prevented and widely under-recognized, under-diagnosed, and under-treated. If urgent action is not taken, chronic respiratory diseases will increase by 30% in next 10 years.

Occupational health problems, particularly lung diseases, account for 10-15 percent of the burden of chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases. Air pollution and cigarette smoking are the most common factors leading to chronic respiratory diseases like asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Asthma is often linked to occupational exposure, increasing risk amongst a range of occupations as diverse as bakers handling flour, ranchers working on animal proteins, and coal miners exposed to asbestos.

Urbanization and industrialization drive economic growth, but it also threatens health. Environmental pollution and occupational diseases pose large challenges. Also in China where more than 60% of the energy is supplied by coal, and safety standards are in need to be strengthened, putting workers and the society at large under increased health risks.

In 2002, about 74% of the Chinese urban areas suffered from air quality that fell short of meeting the national standards. Pulmonary disease was the second leading cause of death with 1.3 million deaths. Such a high rate is closely linked to poor air quality and to high rates of smokers.

With approximately 320 million smokers, China has about 30% of world smokers. In 2005 China was proudly one of the first countries that ratified the Framework Convention of Tobacco Control. Smoking behavior and patterns, however, will not change overnight. More than 50% of all non-smokers in China are exposed to second-hand smoke, including infants and children whose parents smoke around them. It is today's children who will be tomorrow's China; and to give children every opportunity for a healthy start of their precious life, we must work today to reduce the hazards they face through second-hand smoke.

Nearly 80% of the people suffering from the problems of chronic respiratory illnesses live in low and middle-income countries, where there is a general lack of awareness and safety standards are often not well established, delaying early diagnosis. Prevention and control of diseases require a considerable amount of investment, which poorer nations have often difficulties in mobilizing

Even when diagnosis is available often medication is often not affordable for the poor. This is particularly sad because appropriate medication for chronic respiratory illnesses can fully alleviate symptoms and enable patients to lead an entirely normal life.

What can GARD do in this regard? Today many experts will tell you in detail what can be done, but it will roughly fit into two broad categories:

1. **Scale up prevention:** Risk factors leading to chronic respiratory diseases are known. GARD will play an advocacy role to build on and scale up existing prevention programmes. The FCTC will be one of the major pillars in scaling up preventive work with countries.
2. **Increase access to improved diagnostics and treatment :** Not only make diagnostics and treatment available, but also work with governments and industries to make them affordable to those who need them most.

These are not easy tasks and do not involve the health sector alone. Action is required across a broad social spectrum, involving many players in various sectors such as financial, trade, education and other social sectors in order to achieve the goals.

It would, however, be unacceptable if not more attention is given to prevention, and if those who suffer from chronic respiratory diseases do not to have access to the right diagnostics and treatment.

In the hours to follow, we will witness the launch of GARD. The main objective of GARD is to initiate a comprehensive approach to fight chronic diseases, and to make this world a safer place where we can "breathe freely".

I wish you every success in your endeavor.