Distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you all to the World Health Organization and to this beautiful city of Geneva.

I am pleased to know that many of you represent Standards Development Organizations, our Member States, academic and research institutions, implementing partners, donors, and subject matter experts concerned with development, adoption, and implementation of health data standards.

I am also very delighted to know the presence of our regional offices and many technical programmes, which demonstrates the unshaken commitment of all levels of the Organization to work on this strategic issue.

Your work is very important. And this particular Forum on Health Data Standardization and Interoperability is long overdue.

The WHO’s core functions include normative and standard setting as part of Health System Strengthening. WHO has produced standards - in numerous areas of health data and health
information including medicines, laboratory tests, biologicals, vaccines, devices; health interventions, quality, safety; and terminologies and classifications including human resources for health. These “standards” have been created by highest level of technical expertise to serve all Member States and International Community. We must admit all products called standards in WHO are not necessarily produced in a standard fashion. Nevertheless these represent the knowledge on the current health practice for international use.

More importantly this area of Standards is vast and heterogeneous and WHO cannot do this alone. In this work we have always collaborated with several networks of WHO Collaborating Centers and International SDO’s such as ISO, ILO, ITU, CEN, IHTSDO, PHDSC, IEEE, HL7, GS1 and many others including national standardization bodies,– and it is a pleasure to see all of you taking part in this meeting. Every one of you holds an important piece of this common knowledge. Now the challenge is that we join these pieces make our standards talk to each other.

In particular, the area of standards has gained a new importance after the advancement of information and communication technology. Representing our traditional knowledge in digital environment is the key. To enable both computers and humans understand and exchange information our standards should be global and local at the same time. It does not suffice to make a computer application in one hospital or in one country – in our global world this information needs to be shared across institutions, countries. Banks do it, Stock Exchanges do it, Airlines do it – We are asked to do it in the health sector: How can we achieve meaningful exchange of health data? This is essential for serving the people to attain the highest possible level of health as is the key mandate of WHO.

This vision has been an integral part of the WHO Reform agenda and will be clearly articulated in the WHO General Programme of Work for 2014/2019. And the Forum, with the primary objective is to facilitate a dialogue on the subject of standards and interoperability, is much needed to continue to inform our future work.

We believe that through the full adoption of health data standards and related Information Technology standards we can achieve interoperability between systems which leads to the effective, consistent, and accurate collection, exchange and processing of data between and within health information systems and related eHealth services.

You may know that WHO has been entrusted with the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) at its creation in 1948 as the global standard for terminology. Current revision process is aiming to make ICD ready for electronic health applications. It is being built commonly linked to SNOMED-CT and other standard terminologies.

In addition, the Global Health Observatory, the WHO's portal providing access to data and analyses for monitoring the global health situation, where use of appropriate standards becomes essential at country level
I would like to remind you also one important recommendation of the Commission on Information and Accountability for Women’s and Children’s Health which specifically states that “By 2015, all countries have integrated the use of Information and Communication Technologies in their national health information systems and health infrastructure.” It emphasizes the critical need for standards adoption to ensure interoperability of information systems. So, in this context, I would like us to recognize that without proper national planning for eHealth, without following standards and interoperability protocols and without fully meeting country needs, this recommendation cannot be implemented.

The importance of eHealth and data standardization in health sector has been duly recognized by our Member States. As a result, the subject of eHealth and health data standards will be discussed during the forthcoming Executive Board session of January 2013.

However, strengthening eHealth efforts at country-level and implementing reliable Health Information Systems depends on national ownership, multisectoral engagement, appropriate use of ICT, and adequate human capacity.

In the next two days, I hope you will all collectively engage in fruitful discussion on the various aspects of standards adoption at country-level.

I wish you a very successful meeting and look forward to a full report.

Thank you.