Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland officially took up office on the 21st July 1998, as Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO). She takes over from Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, who held the post for 10 years.

Addressing all WHO staff, at Geneva headquarters and in the regional offices, by means of a teleconference organized especially for this occasion, Dr. Brundtland defined her line of action, recalling the firm intention already announced in May during her speech to the World Health Assembly, to “change the course of things” and to “make a difference”. She emphasized that “serving WHO is a privilege” and went on to say, “We can help build healthy communities and populations. We can combat ill-health. We can do our part to combat poverty and suffering. Nothing in life-as I see it- has more meaning”

Dr. Brundtland continued, “What we do here in Geneva and in the regional offices matters very little if it does not lead to a difference on the ground. It only matters if in the end children get better access to care-if health systems are better enabled to reverse the HIV/AIDS pandemic, eradicate polio and roll back killers such as malaria and TB-if we can help countries address challenges as diverse as the threat from tobacco, a rapidly ageing population or the all to often neglected burden of mental illness”

“The impact of our efforts on the ground”, she said, “is sometimes hard to measure. WHO is not and will not become a field agency. Our role is to give the best advice-support and develop the best policies, trigger and stimulate the best research”

With regard to the running of WHO, Dr. Brundtland called for “better communication, more transparency and a clearer distribution of responsibilities”.

After unveiling the new structure of the Organization, the new Director-General of WHO introduced her management team. She also announced that the WHO technical programmes would be divided into nine clusters, each headed by an Executive Director. The new clusters were created in accordance with four main areas of activity.

The first of these areas, entitled “Building healthy populations and communities” includes the group “Social change and mental health” directed by Dr. Yasuhiko Suzuki; the group “Family and health services”, directed by Dr. Olive Shisana, and the group “Sustainable development and healthy environments”, directed by Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh.

The second area, “Combating ill health” includes “Communicable diseases”, directed by Dr. David L. Heymann, and the group “Noncommunicable diseases”, directed by Dr. Jie Chen.
The third area, entitled “Sustained health”, includes: “Evidence and information for policy”, directed by Dr. Julio J. Frenk, and “Health technology and drugs”, directed by Dr. Michael Scholtz.

The fourth and final group, entitled, “Internal support-reaching out”, includes “General management”, directed by Mrs. Ann Kern, and the group “External affairs and governing bodies”, directed by Dr. Souad Lyagoubi-Ouahchi.

The cabinet which will consist of the Director-General and the nine Executive Directors will meet once a week. The office of the Director-General will have a small group of senior policy advisers, headed by Ambassador Jonas Gahr Store. These advisers are Dr. Asamoah-Baah, Dr. J.W. Lee and Dr. Daniel Tarantola.

Dr. Brundtland said that the Executive Directors will have until 1 November to make recommendations on the final organization of their group. In a circular distributed to all staff last week, Ambassador Store, head of the Transition Team, said that the new Executive Directors would “immediately be asked to start working with their staff to develop and implement working procedures suited to the new structure and arrangements”, and that this would be “a step-by-step process, with the close involvement of staff”.

In her speech to the staff of WHO, Dr. Brundtland stressed that the new proposed structure would “give us the right start”. She added “but no model is carved out in stone. We will learn as we go-being open to suggestions and ideas”.

The above information is quoted from press release WHO/54. Together with the new team of the world health leaders, we need to join hands and work harder to improve the health and well being of our world population. HRDJ will be one of such movement.

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