

News story: The WHO – why everyone should care

Health is one of the most precious things to us and our families. It is also something we can sometimes take for granted, until we no longer have it. That is why it is important to reflect on the achievements we've made as a global community to tackle big health threats and protect ourselves from killer diseases.

The work of World Health Organisation (WHO) impacts on the health and wellbeing of billions of people. When governments want to share their experience of responding to health challenges, they engage with WHO. WHO's Director-General is responsible for running the organization. It is a complex task. The WHO helps countries work out how best to organize health services for their people and helps countries respond to infectious disease outbreaks. It adapts its responses to the circumstances of each country: this is not an easy task, given that each country has very different needs. It also helps people in conflict and crises providing expertise and information to treat those in need.

The WHO's Governing Assembly is set to elect a new Director-General at the end of May this year. My name is Dr David Nabarro and I am one of three candidates in the running for this role. It feels to me as though I have been in training to become Director-General of WHO for my entire life. I have a burning ambition to help people in difficulty and to ensure they achieve their full potential. My motivation comes from every patient I've ever treated, and from every community that I have served. I want to be sure that whatever I do in life brings benefit to people most in need: this ambition to serve has stayed with me throughout my professional life.

I am a medical doctor with over 40 years experience – I know what it's like on the front line and at the top table of international health improvement. I have worked in more than 50 countries across the world – in places such as India, Nepal, Indonesia and Bangladesh. I understand the complexity of the UN and multilateral systems and I know how to make them work well. I've worked on the sustainable development goals, climate change and food security. I am the only Director-General candidate who has successfully managed complex global challenges and led the world in responding to crises including malaria, avian influenza and Ebola. If another disease outbreak hits I know I have the experience to lead WHO to respond.

I first came to Kazakhstan in 1991 and was involved in work between the UK and Kazakhstan on health improvements. It is a country I have stayed closely associated with over the last few decades, seeing how health services have developed and how public health in particular has advanced. Good progress has been made and the government should be commended. However, challenges remain. Cardiovascular disease is one of the most common causes of death, along with other non-communicable or "lifestyle" diseases. There is also still work to be done to rid the country of tuberculosis.

As Director-General of WHO I will lead an organization that catalyses reductions in widespread suffering caused by diseases such as cancer, obesity and diabetes. I will help member states dealing with these lifestyle illnesses through early intervention and prevention, something that can be achieved at low cost. I will also strive to ensure that the most vulnerable are not forgotten and that women and children get access to the health services they need.

Equally, it is vital that work continues to deal with the impending crisis of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) which has seen the emergence of so called “superbugs” that don’t respond to medicines in the way they used to. Tuberculosis in particular is a real source of concern in this regard.

As WHO Director-General I will want to work with Kazakhstan’s leaders, including Health Minister Elzhan Birtanov who I was pleased to meet with on my visit last week, to build on recent success. Whether it is focused on improving people’s health security in the face of infectious disease threats, managing the impacts of air pollution on people’s health, tackling cancer, cardiovascular disease and diabetes or driving forward work on AMR, WHO has much to offer. The WHO is a vital organization for a healthy world and I am passionate about ensuring it can deliver results for all.

Note for editors:

Dr David Nabarro is one of the three nominees for the post of Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO). He has worked as a doctor, educator and international public servant, focusing on global health, for over 40 years. He has worked across more than 50 countries. Find out more at www.davidnabarro.info