



## **SENATOR THE HON JAN McLUCAS**

### **Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Ageing**

#### **STATEMENT**

##### **62nd WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY 2009 Impact of the economic and financial crisis on global health 18 May 2009**

Australia has had a long record of active engagement with, and participation in, both the World Health Assembly and the World Health Organization. It is therefore a great honour for me, as Parliamentary Secretary to the Australian Minister for Health and Ageing, to address this Assembly today.

The Assembly's plenary theme, the impact of the economic and financial crisis on global health, is an important issue for all nations and one that should not be overshadowed by the very immediate issues facing us regarding influenza AH1N1 (2009).

The influenza outbreak is, in fact, a stark reminder that we cannot allow the current economic and financial crisis to undermine our efforts to build an effective global health system. Uncoordinated, individual action, or inaction, can multiply the global effects of outbreaks. Conversely, coordinated detection, prevention and response can contain their adverse effects. An encouraging takeout from the recent events is how much the experience of recent years, and of all our work globally, to build surveillance and planning capacity, has facilitated a speedy and effective international response.

Now, as the WHO often reminds us, health in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a shared responsibility, involving equitable access to essential care and collective defence against transnational threats. It is vital that our responses, national and global, to both the influenza outbreak and the financial crisis, are consistent with these principles.

One dictionary definition of a '*crisis*' is "*a decisive or vitally important stage in the course of anything*" – and in this definition, perhaps the most important word is DECISIVE. The challenges of the financial crisis for global health – maintaining our commitment to critical health services and providing ongoing support to developing countries in building capacity and strengthening health systems – highlight the importance of making sound evidence-based investments in solid and sustainable health system architecture.

Having in place equitable health financing systems, robust primary health care systems, good data systems for policy development, and well trained health workforces, are just some of the important features in ensuring the resilience of health systems in difficult times.

Australia is fortunate to have a high quality health system that supports universal provision of health services while not excluding private services for those with the capacity to pay. Australia's Medicare system provides us with affordable, accessible health care, where most people can see their doctor free of charge or can access free treatment in public hospitals. Our

Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme makes a wide range of necessary prescription medicines available at affordable prices. And we are working hard to increase the focus on prevention, so we can keep people well and out of hospital.

While the global financial crisis presents challenges for all health systems, it should not be automatically a barrier to ongoing health system reform. Australia, for instance, has committed to a major health reform agenda and we intend to maintain our reform momentum despite changed economic circumstances. In fact, the need for economic stimulus is driving a renewed investment in key health infrastructure such as hospitals, clinical schools and medical research facilities. This will benefit not only job creation, but will help build health infrastructure for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Current financial circumstances also highlight the importance of reform options that are not just about spending more money. Encouraging the health sector and other sectors of the economy to give more emphasis to prevention is one example. Strengthening the primary health care system by making it more multidisciplinary and better equipped to manage chronic disease is another. Making better use of the currently available health workforce and ensuring governments have a sound evidence base for their health- purchasing decisions are also important.

These are just some reforms that Australia is implementing – reforms that we hope will improve the long term sustainability of our health system to enable us to respond to unexpected shocks like the global financial crisis, and also, to longer term pressures from population ageing, technological advances and the growing burden of chronic disease.

The global financial crisis also provides a salient reminder of the importance of ensuring equity of access to health services and health outcomes, in all countries. And it highlights the importance of ensuring strong partnerships are in place at all levels of government, business and community organisations to address economic and social disadvantage – and not just that resulting from current economic circumstances. Promoting social inclusion is a key priority for the Australian Government, as is closing the gap in health outcomes and life expectancy between our Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

The recent influenza outbreak and the current global financial environment demonstrate the criticality that countries not become excessively inward looking in times of crisis. Donor countries like Australia must continue our commitment to supporting health system strengthening in our regions as well as globally. We must also maintain our commitment to the Millennium Development Goals. Australia is in fact increasing our support for the maternal and child health MDGs. And we will continue to work with countries in our region to build partnerships, and exchange knowledge, between us.

In conclusion, the current economic environment and the current influenza outbreak, should be seen as a call for us to continue our global commitment to deliver “health for all” through reforms to our own systems and working collaboratively across the globe. WHO remains a critical partner for us all in this process. Let us make the most of this ‘crisis’, that is, this moment for ‘decisive change’.

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