

Report of the Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Health Geneva, 19 May 2013

The Commonwealth Advisory Committee on Health (CACH) met in February and again yesterday. I had the honour of chairing these meetings.

The CACH advises on matters of public health concern and interest to the Commonwealth through the Health Section of the Commonwealth Secretariat.

The Committee has a critical role in assisting the Health Section to develop a productive and feasible work programme and in the planning of your annual Meeting. The Committee comprises of 16 people representing governments, regional organisations and civil society appointed on a rotating basis.

This is a critical year for health in the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Secretariat's strategic plan for 2013-17 will soon be finalised and later this year the Commonwealth Heads of Government meet in Sri Lanka.

At its meeting in February the Committee discussed the work on mental health commissioned to inform today's meeting. Following a discussion on the post 2015 agenda the committee requested a paper to inform today's discussion. We also discussed the Commonwealth Hub and how this might advance work on health issues across the Commonwealth. We also initiated a discussion on future governance arrangements that might be needed once the Commonwealth Strategic plan is finalised.

Turning to the meeting held yesterday, we focussed on work planning. We received a presentation, from the Health section, on the 2012-13 programme of work. We noted that changes in the Secretariat have had an impact on the ability of the health section to deliver the original work plan.

To highlight some of the health sections work this year. They have been active in improving the quality of midwifery training in some African countries in support of the maternal health MDG, and using e-health to help address the incidence of NCDs. In addition the health section has been active supporting the integration of HIV/AIDS and TB programmes to help save lives.

The Committee was informed that the Commonwealth Board of Governor's is due to meet on 23 May to finalise the Commonwealth Secretariat strategic plan for 2013-17. We were informed that the draft plan recognises the essential role that health and education play in democracy and development - something which many Commonwealth countries and Civil Society Organisations have been lobbying for.

We concluded that until the strategic plan has been adopted, it would not be appropriate to finalise a plan of work for the health section, neither did we feel able at this stage to recommend a theme for the next CHMM although there are many significant issues to choose from [eg tobacco control. Post 2015, AMR etc].

CACH is therefore proposing to meet next month to discuss the next work programme for the health section. With your agreement, our proposal is that this work programme, together with a suggested theme for the next CHMM be submitted to you for agreement by correspondence.

The Secretariat is committed to producing a draft, results based work plan for future health work. CACH has asked that a clear framework is developed to prioritise future work to ensure that within the resources available work is focussed on those activities which provide the greatest added value consistent with the Commonwealth's comparative advantage.

In subsequent years CACH will present a draft work plan to CHMM for agreement and provide a report on achievements since the last meeting.

In light of the new strategic plan CACH discussed possible future governance arrangements. We explored a number of options

including the possibility of creating a virtual network of representatives from all countries. We recognised that any changes would need to be discussed at a future CHMM meeting. CACH will return to this issue at its next meeting.

So to conclude – this is a pivotal year for health across the Commonwealth. Once the strategic plan is adopted we need to move fast to agree the next health work programme and then consider future governance arrangements to support this activity.