

Sustainable Health Systems for Economic Growth, Development and Wealth

S Keizer-Beache

On September 28, 2016, CARICOM posted the following statement on its website titled ‘Caribbean declared measles free’:

‘WASHINGTON, United States CMC — The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) says the Americas including the Caribbean, is the first in the world to have eliminated measles, a viral disease that can cause severe health problems, including pneumonia, blindness, brain swelling and even death.

“This achievement culminates a 22-year effort involving mass vaccination against measles, mumps and rubella throughout the Americas,” said PAHO, adding that the declaration of measles’ elimination was made by the International Expert Committee for Documenting and Verifying Measles, Rubella, and Congenital Rubella Syndrome Elimination in the Americas.

PAHO said the announcement came during its 55th Directing Council.’

As noted in the statement, this major accomplishment was the result of more than 20 years of significant investment of resources. The entire region of the Americas, the epicentre of the non-communicable diseases (NCD) epidemic, had conquered a communicable disease that had caused major illness for years – the epidemiological transition in action. The freedom to focus on the new epidemic of diabetes, cancers and hypertension was welcomed. Resources might be diverted from the old fight.

On September 29, 2017, one year and a day after the proud declaration, Reuters published a report entitled ‘One million unvaccinated Venezuelan kids vulnerable in measles outbreak: doctors’.

The article gave the reason for the emergence of this threat to the 2016 accomplishment: ‘A crippling shortage of medicines and vaccines, as well as decaying hospitals and an exodus of doctors has thrown Venezuela’s health sector into a tailspin’.

The Epidemiological Update – Measles by WHO/PAHO on April 6, 2018 states:

‘Since the last Epidemiological Update for Measles issued by the Pan American Health Organization / World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) on 16 March 2018, two additional countries in the Region of the Americas have confirmed measles cases: Argentina (1 case) and Ecuador (1 case). This brings the total number of countries with confirmed measles cases since the beginning of 2018 to epidemiological week (EW) 14 to 11. This figure is higher than in

2017, when four countries reported confirmed measles cases in the Region: Argentina (3 cases), Canada (45), the United States of America (120) and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (727 cases). Between EW 1 and EW 14 of 2018, confirmed measles cases in the Region were reported in Antigua and Barbuda (1), Argentina (1), Brazil (46), Canada (4), Colombia (5), Ecuador (1), the United States of America (41), Guatemala (1), Mexico (4), Peru (2) and Venezuela (279).’ How did we go from being ‘measles free’ to being under the threat of a measles outbreak in one year? Why are our gains in the fight against HIV/AIDS also at risk? How does a small island recover from a catastrophic assault by a category five hurricane? Political instability caused by internal and external players, food security and sovereignty, migration and immigration, globalization, these are but a few of the factors that influence the health system and therefore, our capacity to maintain health and wellness.

Sustainable health systems must be capable of maintaining the gains of the past and at the same time address the new and re-emerging threats to our health and well-being, if we as a region are to have economic growth, development and wealth. These systems must be resilient in the face of the growing threats posed by changing family structures, climate change, increasing NCDs, communicable diseases and growing nationalism, issues addressed in previous Research Conferences.

The 63rd Annual Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) Health Research Conference, themed ‘Sustainable Health Systems for Economic Growth, Development and Wealth’, aims to explore the multiple facets that contribute to and influence sustainable health systems. The intricate relationships of epidemiology, health financing and universal healthcare will be discussed. The various strategies to strengthen regional health systems, including systems science, evidence-based interventions and innovative management, will be presented.

Throughout the years, the Caribbean Health Research Council and now, the CARPHA Health Research Conference have focussed on healthcare-related challenges with an aim to develop solutions best suited to Caribbean communities. By providing an opportunity for all stakeholders to become aware of the latest research findings, best practices, training through research presentations, round table discussions, symposia and capacity-building workshops, we strive to produce sustainable and resilient health systems vital for our health and, therefore, our wealth.