

## Pandemic, NCDs and Climate Change: The Caribbean's Triple Threat

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I have great pleasure in penning this my first editorial as the Executive Director of CARPHA, on the occasion of 65 years of showcasing health research in the Caribbean.

Had CARPHA had its way, the 65<sup>th</sup> Conference would have been held in 2020, and this editorial would have been written then. However, the world has been battling the COVID-19 pandemic for over a year, and CARPHA's Annual Health Research Conference, as a face-to-face event, was one of the many casualties of the forced need to separate to avoid transmission of SARS-CoV-2.

CARPHA was well advanced with the arrangements for the 2020 Conference, so this year we already had many excellent oral and poster presentations, pre-selected, to which we have added many more. So, we have a bumper edition for 2021.

Thus, a microscopic organism has completely reshaped this 65<sup>th</sup> Conference.

Firstly, its title 'Pandemic, NCDs and Climate Change: The Caribbean's Triple Threat' will allow CARPHA to showcase the research in this region on the worst pandemic the world has known. It is true that after a year of COVID-19, there are fewer deaths than the 50–100 million of the 1918 pandemic. However, I defend that claim by outlining the level of social disruption with record levels of gender, domestic and racial violence, and educational disruption which has been the frustration of teachers and students alike, with four-year-olds spending hours staring at a screen instead of being socialized with their friends and playing.

Add to that the illness and death from acute COVID-19 and the mental ill health and other systemic complications of 'Long COVID' of the survivors and multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) which affects children. Then, combine that with the economic disaster that COVID-19 has caused, with billions of dollars in lost revenue as whole industries and sectors literally stopped, businesses closed after over a century of profitability and millions fell into the poverty and homelessness that they never envisaged even in March 2020.

Finally, we are witnessing one of the most ethically shameful times of our lives, when vaccines are purchased in excess, unwanted by the residents of those States, while other States watch their citizenry die because of lack of access to the same vaccines.

As dire as this picture is, it is in the context of the ongoing existential threats to mankind – climate change and non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

The effects of climate change are currently unpreventable, as the actions of our recent ancestors have set the world on an unchangeable course of environmental destruction which has already caused a whole Caribbean island – Barbuda – to be evacuated in 2017 due to the destructive effects of a truly severe hurricane season. Our current actions can change effects only decades in the future! So, this year's research conference presentations are even more important, as we search for evidence to inform policy and programming that combat climate change in this new world that COVID-19 is forcing us to create.

The slow burn of the pandemic of NCDs, which, unlike climate change, we can still do much to prevent with our current actions, continues to be the greatest cost to our health systems and economies as we in the Caribbean have unacceptably high prevalence of NCDs and their risk factors. With loss of productive years increasing (because young people and even children have risk factors of obesity, cigarette smoking or its secondhand effects, and harmful use of alcohol), our young researchers' voices will be heard as they tell the scientific tale of how the Caribbean is waging the war against NCDs. It is particularly urgent that the Conference gives us insights, as NCDs and their risk factors predispose COVID-19 sufferers to developing the more severe forms of the disease and dying. NCDs have also caused deaths among younger persons with chronic diseases.

We are therefore happy that in 2021, the 65<sup>th</sup> Conference, which is the longest running in the Caribbean, will be distinguished by the scientific ingenuity and innovation of some of the world's most resilient and determined people – the people of the Caribbean.

This year is another first: 2021 will initiate the virtual paradigm for this Conference. The pandemic still rages, but we were resolute that we must proceed and not let COVID-19 put an end to the highlighting of some truly interesting research that is ongoing into the effects of the virus in our tiny corner of the world. We have re-engineered how this conference will look and give the attendees even more ways to network and interact with fellow researchers and policy advisors.

International partners are figuring largely this time as Agence Française de Développement is a major sponsor, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization, will inspire us in the Opening Ceremony to keep fighting the good public health fight, and Chelsea Clinton will moderate a panel which we hope will stimulate us to find new ways to tackle vaccine hesitancy.

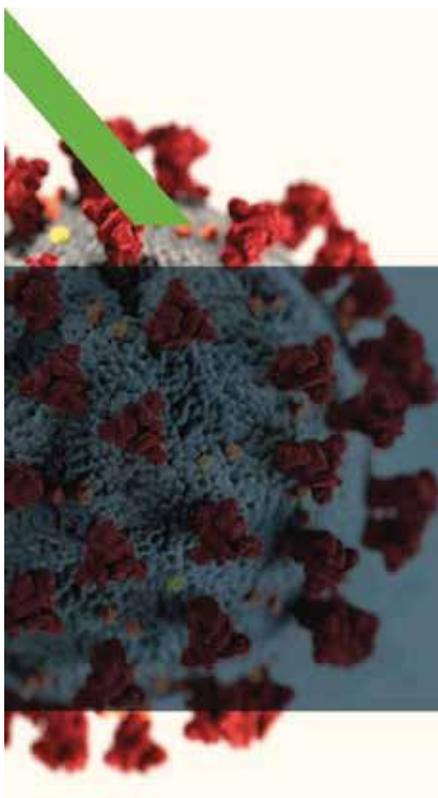
But home drums beat loud and strong because I am thrilled to report that Dr Dave Picou and Dr Donald Simeon will bring us messages as representatives of the progenitor organizations, Commonwealth Caribbean Medical Research Council (CCMRC) and Caribbean Health Research Council (CHRC), respectively.

CARPHA will do everything to make the 65<sup>th</sup> Conference a product of the new virtual paradigm but with a

uniquely Caribbean dynamic. We will not forget that Caribbean people love to get together and celebrate, so this year we are going to have an Awards Banquet, and we will celebrate excellence in research and express thanks for the fact that in our Caribbean, despite a deadly virus taking its toll, so many of us still persevered to research and discover and drive policy and decision-making and we are still alive to tell the world about the Caribbean.

Therefore, my friends in research, CARPHA is stepping into this new virtual COVID-19 world with our eyes wide open and with the resolve to showcase the Caribbean in all its scientific excellence even in the face of the triple threat.

Enjoy!



# 100<sup>th</sup> SITUATION REPORT

CARPHA COVID-19 PANDEMIC RESPONSE