

Remarks delivered by Mr. Luis De Shong, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Health, Wellness and the Environment, at the Launch of the Expanded Diabetic Care Program on Wednesday 14th January 2015.

Protocol already being established, good morning.

May I add my own warm words of welcome to you all here this morning at this very important ceremony which is designed to launch our Expanded Diabetic Care Program. I am delighted to see you all here this morning. For me, ladies and gentlemen, it is with an enormous amount of satisfaction and pride that I address you today as a committed partner in the field of health in my capacity as Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of Health, Wellness and the Environment.

Today's launch, ladies and gentlemen, is indeed significant, because it signals an important step in our active struggle against the burden of chronic disease complications, and this struggle, ladies and gentlemen, presents a veritable global challenge. I am minded to state here that as we witness the innumerable advances in technology, and as new treatments come on stream, the methods by which diseases are detected and treated will improve. This, therefore, suggests that people will live longer. The challenge with an ageing population, however, is the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes. This is indeed a challenge which we must and can overcome.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are all aware that diabetes and other chronic diseases place a significant burden on our health sector. We are also aware that chronic diseases constitute the most prevalent and costly health care challenge for us here in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. There are many Vincentians who suffer from at least one chronic disease, and more than two-thirds of all deaths in this country are caused by one or more of five chronic diseases: heart disease, cancer, stroke, hypertension, and diabetes. Many chronic diseases are lifelong conditions, and their impact lessens the quality of life not only of those suffering from these diseases, but also of their family members, caregivers, and others.

Ladies and gentlemen, chronic diseases also constitute a major driver of health care costs and threaten health care affordability. The economic burden imposed by chronic diseases is universal. For small economies such as ours, it is a huge matter of concern, given that each year millions of dollars are spent tackling the complications of chronic diseases. There is, therefore, a great urgency for us to aggressively address the modifiable lifestyle factors such as unhealthy diets, lack of physical activity, tobacco smoking and excessive alcohol consumption, all of which can lead to the known chronic diseases. The complications of diabetes can lead to amputations, eye disorders and other restricting conditions which rob the individual of a better quality of life.

Ladies and gentlemen, much of the persistent increase in spending over recent years is attributable to rising disease prevalence, lower clinical thresholds for treatment, and new medical innovations that have emerged to treat chronic and other diseases. Medical advances are helping people to live longer, and with this great achievement, it therefore, means that we have to care for patients with these conditions for a longer period of time. Not only do we have to manage and treat these conditions, but we also have to deal with the numerous complications. And there is evidence throughout the world to suggest that diabetes is reaching epidemic proportions. We, therefore, need to do a much better job managing chronic diseases such as diabetes and its related complications.

So today, ladies and gentlemen, the Ministry of Health, Wellness and the Environment is moving a step further in our enormous attempt to strengthen our primary healthcare response to diabetes. We are not only ensuring access to treatment, but we have now undertaken this initiative that is designed to empower all persons to control their blood glucose levels through self-monitoring. Self-care is an important facet in the control of diabetes and maintenance of a certain level of independence, which is important to many of us. We therefore, recognise the importance of health promotion and prevention strategies for the management of chronic diseases. Diabetics will now each be given a glucose monitoring machine to allow them to monitor their condition so that they can take action and prevent it from worsening.

Self-management is a critical component in managing chronic diseases, and in particular, in the management of diabetes. It is what the person with a chronic disease does to manage his/her own illness, not what the health clinician does. It is important, therefore, that patients actively participate in the management of their own health, given that the research suggests that patients who do so realise significant improvements in the clinical indicators of diabetes management, have higher rates of self-management goal setting and achievement, as well as increased satisfaction with diabetes care, and also a reduction in medical costs.

In closing, ladies and gentlemen, we must face the epidemic of chronic diseases. If we don't, the human costs will continue to soar. It is likely that we may even face a lack of available or affordable care when it is needed most. The financial and human costs of chronic diseases can no longer be ignored. I therefore, urge non-diabetics to take control of their health.

I urge each of you to begin to use your glucometer immediately so that you can monitor your condition. I urge you to always remember that self-empowerment is the key to diabetic control. We are empowered when we work together. It is only in this way that we can prevent the known complications of diabetes. Ladies and gentlemen, the power is at our fingertips.