

## **Address by Hon Clayton Burgin, Minister of Health, Wellness and the Environment, to mark World Health Day 2014**

Ladies and gentlemen, today, Monday 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2014, St. Vincent and the Grenadines joins the rest of the world in celebration of World Health Day 2014.

World Health Day is celebrated each year on this day to mark the anniversary of the founding of the World Health Organization in 1948, and also to celebrate the gains that we have made in providing health care and combating diseases. Each year, a priority area is selected, one which highlights a priority area of public health. This year, the focus for the celebration is vector-borne diseases.

Ladies and gentlemen, vectors are living organisms that can transmit infectious diseases between humans or from animals to humans. Many of these vectors are bloodsucking insects which ingest disease-producing micro organisms during a

blood meal from an infected host (human or animal) and later inject them into a new host during their next blood meal. Although there are several vectors, mosquitoes are by far the best known.

The mosquito of greatest concern to us here in St. Vincent and the Grenadines is the *aedes aegypti*. This mosquito is the one which causes dengue fever and is, according to the World Health Organisation, the world's fastest growing vector borne disease.

Here in St Vincent and the Grenadines, we are all familiar with the impact of dengue fever – the human suffering, absenteeism from work and school, inter alia, with a resultant loss in productivity, hospitalization and, in some cases, death, as a consequence of dengue haemorrhagic fever.

As we intensify our efforts, ladies and gentlemen, to respond to the dengue epidemic, we also have to be mindful that many of

the other vector born diseases that were once unknown to us are today presenting a serious challenge to our public health. At this very moment, the word Chikungunya comes to mind. Prior to last year, this was a disease virtually unknown to most of us. But today, ladies and gentlemen, after its recent entry into the Caribbean, Chikungunya has now become a household name. Thankfully, we have not yet recorded any cases of Chikungunya. Nevertheless, ladies and gentlemen, the threat looms large, especially since St. Lucia, our closest northern neighbour, reported its first case last week. Perhaps it is just a matter of time before it reaches our shores, given that it is transmitted by the same vector that transmits dengue fever.

Ladies and gentlemen, Chikungunya and other non-indigenous vector borne diseases such as malaria and yellow fever, among others, are now being monitored closely by the National Surveillance Committee within the Ministry of Health, Wellness and the Environment, because these diseases are no longer confined to their traditional geographical location. The threat of these diseases is even more potently facilitated by climate

change, which may result in changing habitat and distribution of vectors, and the phenomenal increases in international travel and trade. These changes create opportunities for vectors and the diseases they spread to take up residence in new areas.

For all these diseases, ladies and gentlemen, vector control is the most powerful preventive tool, but it must be used to its full potential. The Ministry of Health, Wellness and the Environment has, therefore, invested in both the human and physical resources necessary in this regard. However, the huge efforts by the professionals within the Ministry will come to nought if individuals, households and communities do not support or complement these efforts.

In my capacity as Minister of Health, Wellness and the Environment, I am, therefore, using this opportunity to call on every citizen of our blessed land to play his/her part in preventing the breeding and propagation of vectors.

Today, ladies and gentlemen, the professionals at the Insect Vector Control Unit within the Ministry of Health, Wellness and the Environment will mount an exhibition designed to point the way towards integrated vector control, at the entrance to the Postal Services Corporation, beginning at 9 am. I, therefore, take this opportunity to invite all citizens to view this exhibition and become informed.

In closing, I leave you with the words of Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization: "It is my sincere wish that this World Health Day will invigorate vector control and give it the high profile it deserves. No one in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should die from the bite of a mosquito..."

Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you and wish you a happy, healthy and productive day.

