

**Remarks by Minister of Health**

**Hon. Dr. Fenton Ferguson**

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**Connecting with Vision 2030 for a Healthy Jamaica**

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Salutations

Thank you for extending this invitation to me. I am pleased to be a part of this year’s Diaspora Health Forum as I am always happy to participate in any event that puts the interest of Jamaica’s health sector at the forefront. Like I said in Parliament a week ago I feel closer to the Diaspora now than ever before. Since working in the Health Ministry I have come to better understand what drives you and I have realized that it is the same thing that drives me as a Minister of Government to serve in the way that I do – love for country. Jamaica has a proud tradition of great countrymen – and women - who have excelled across the world but have never forgotten to give back to their land of birth. Members of the Diaspora here today and even those who could not make it are among those great Jamaicans who we continue to salute with pride. Our little island paradise has seen many difficulties over the years but the strength of our people has always moved us above and beyond any challenge that we face.

Jamaica has a population of 2.8 million people with less than adequate resources. Despite this we have been able to maintain indicators in line with some developed countries. According to the Human Development Index, in 2006 Jamaica ranked above the average life expectancy of developing countries which was 65 years. Our life expectancy is now 75 for females and 71.5 for males. Jamaica also has one of the best human resource cadres in health in the world which I believe contributes to the strides that we have made even with great resource constraints. As a Government we are aware of the strategic value of health not just in the development of the country but also of the individual, family and community. The Government is very much attuned to the social determinants of health which give rise to generational poverty. If a breadwinner for example, falls ill and does not have access to quality and affordable care it affects the ability of children to go to school, it affects the nutritional status of the family and could push persons deeper into poverty. What we see from this scenario is the possibility of a continuing cycle of poverty when there's no real hope for progress for the next generation especially when their ability to get a good education is affected.

The health sector has the ability to drastically transform the country and improve the lives of many Jamaicans by reversing the cycle of poverty if we make the required investments. The National Development Plan – Vision 2030 has as national outcome number one a healthy and stable population. The idea is to build on the positives of the health sector and strengthen the areas in which we are lagging behind. This will be done through the development and improvement of our health care delivery system and simultaneously building awareness of our population to move closer towards observing healthy lifestyle practices and better health seeking behaviour.

The National Development Plan requires an emphasis on primary health care and so this Administration has committed in its manifesto to providing “universal access at primary care.” We are moving steadfastly towards building a primary health care system that can serve the holistic needs of our population. To this end we have among other things:

- Put in place four primary care centres of excellence, one in each of the four health regions. The Centres provide full service to members of the communities within which they are located. They will also be the examples that we use to guide our upgrade of other health centres.
- Upgraded more than 100 health centres through the primary health care infrastructure renewal programme
- Implemented the National Health Information System and E-Health Strategy as part of which we have started to put in place the Electronic Patient Administration System (ePAS) as a pilot in eight facilities - the four Primary Care Centres of Excellence and four regional hospitals.
- Increased the cadre of working equipment in the health sector generally and at the primary care level specifically
- Addressed some of the human resource deficiencies especially in the more rural sections of the island
- Stepped up our health promotion activities at the level of the community

The Jamaican Government is also moving to reform the health system to provide increased access to affordable and quality health care. As part of this move a 10 year strategic plan will be

created for the health sector. The Government also remains committed to building the secondary care infrastructure as part of an overall drive to develop the public health sector in a holistic way. Our aim is to achieve a smooth integration of the network of facilities from primary to secondary to tertiary care. The ideal is for persons to start at the primary care level where prevention and health promotion would be our main focus. The secondary care level takes into consideration the need for services that may not be available at primary care such as ambulatory, specialised medical services, therapeutic support and emergency services. This is why we are on a path to developing our health systems simultaneously so that we can accommodate that smooth transition. The Jamaican Government has spent nearly \$1.5 billion since 2012 in infrastructure improvements and equipment acquisition for our public hospitals. This year we will continue the development of the health care delivery system by making strategic investments in several communities.

These strategic investments are in line with Jamaica's move towards universal access to health which we have made a priority. We are aware that if we do not act quickly, families and communities will be adversely affected and the productive capacity of the country will be undermined. This will also affect our ability to achieve our National Development Goals. The government of Jamaica subscribes to the WHO philosophy that health care is a fundamental human right. I want to make it clear that the move towards universal access has to be incremental and sustainable. We have taken several steps to improve access to care and efficiencies in the health sector as part of this broader objective. These include:

- The takeover of Pharmacy Services by the National Health Fund to improve overall efficiency as well as service delivery

- The introduction of the Government of Jamaica Health Card which will improve operational efficiency, the collection of fees from persons with private health insurance and reduce wastage especially in the way we dispense medication.
- The implementation of the National Health Information Strategic Plan which will bring greater efficiencies in our health care system while establishing that platform to advance the local and international health agendas putting us on a course to develop our telemedicine and health tourism sectors.
- The Primary Health Care Renewal Policy which addresses the need for infrastructure improvements and equipment availability at the community level
- Establishment of the four Centres of Excellence at the primary level of care to provide holistic and enhanced services to communities
- Significant investments in equipment and the physical plant at both the primary and secondary levels
- The nine Health Financing Consultations that we hosted within the past year to get feedback on mechanisms that we can employ to sustainably finance the health sector.

Our challenge is to design an effective health financing mechanism that can adequately serve our needs especially while considering all of our commitments and constraints. Access to increased financing can enable us to better manage and operate the public health sector in a way that will improve equity, efficiency and health outcomes.

We have a long way to go to get to the kind of health care system that will adequately serve the needs of our population but the Government cannot achieve this on its own. Financing health

projects and programmes especially in this time in which we are experiencing a significantly reduced fiscal space requires that we seek partnerships. Our policy direction is one which views public/private partnerships as an important strategy to achieve our health goals. The development of our health infrastructure requires input from all sectors. The Diaspora has been a long standing and important partner in health and on behalf of the Government of Jamaica, I thank you for your continued dedication and service to the country.

This partnership has greatly enhanced service delivery, the health infrastructure and equipment acquisition in the health sector. In 2012 for example, we hosted 172 Medical Missions and saw savings of US\$537,000 for pharmaceuticals and in 2013 we hosted 197 Missions with savings for pharmaceuticals and other medications amounting to about US\$990,000.

I have taken several steps to improve relations with the Diaspora and better facilitate the work of members. I have put in place a Think Tank and Advisory Body on Diaspora Affairs and Medical Missions. Among its responsibilities are to increase the responsiveness of the Ministry and its agencies to facilitate the work of individual volunteers and Missions as well as to be the liaison between the Ministry and the Diaspora to ensure a responsive and streamlined process of engagement. Liaison officers have been identified for all public hospitals. These persons will directly interface with the Task Force to seek development assistance relating to the philanthropic initiatives as well as pursue public/private partnerships.

We now have a completed draft of the Gift Policy for which we are at the consultation stage. The policy will provide guidance to our many donors and streamline the way in which we accept gifts

in the health sector. The International Cooperation in Health Unit in the Ministry of Health will continue to provide guidance and oversight for these initiatives.

I want to speak a little about the development of the health tourism sector in Jamaica in which the Diaspora will play a major role. Jamaica is poised to take advantage of the emerging health tourism market as our health sector is among the best in the world in terms of services offered as well as the numerous talented human resources we have. The country's health service is globally competitive in terms of availability of the required talents as well as cost for services. The quality and sustainability of Jamaica's health service system surpasses that of its Latin American and Caribbean neighbours. The investments that we are presently making in health will move us closer to developing the health tourism sector. In fact, we now have the North-West Corridor Trauma Plan which is a proposal to develop the corridor from Negril to St. Ann to improve trauma care and is a part of the health tourism thrust. Under the plan the capacity of the St. Ann's Bay, Falmouth, Cornwall Regional, Noel Holmes Hospitals and Negril Health Centre will be improved to ensure that they are able to effectively manage trauma cases and accept referrals where necessary. A plan will be developed to address any major gaps in the emergency health care situation in that Region. Negril, Montego Bay and Ocho Rios alone accounted for more than 70 percent of the 1.8 million stop over visitors we hosted in 2012. We are confident that this will bring enormous value to efforts to develop health tourism and improve the level of service that we offer to our own citizens.

We are by no means at the stage where we want to be in terms of the development of the health sector. We also have numerous challenges outside of the tight fiscal space. Non communicable

diseases, for example, remain a major concern as they are the biggest cause of mortality and disability in the country. We are making progress in terms of our plans to address the prevalence of these diseases but we have not yet made any significant dent. We will need the cooperation of our citizens and partners to effectively deal with the scourge of NCDs. To this end we have forged several partnerships to reduce the burden of cancer which is one of the major NCDs affecting Jamaica as well as improve delivery of service in other areas of health:

- We have a Memorandum of Understanding with Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre to develop systems of cancer care, emergency pre-hospital care, trauma and emergency medicine and chronic disease management.
- We have a Memorandum of Understanding with “Sick Kids” Hospital to strengthen the delivery of cancer care to children.
- The Vincent HoSang Family Foundation has gotten on board with assisting us to purchase two Linear Accelerator (LINAC) machines. I am pleased to note that Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre will assist us in the preparation for the commissioning of these machines once received.
- We are in the process of signing an MOU with Columbia University and
- We have signed a second MOU with Chain of Hope, UK

We cannot achieve our Development Goals if our health sector does not move apace to provide the essential services that our population requires. The Government of Jamaica is ensuring that we put in place the necessary interventions to build our health care delivery system in a way that will result in the country achieving the goal of a healthy and stable population as outlined in our



National Development Plan, Vision 2030. With your partnership and assistance I am confident that we will make Jamaica the place of choice to live, work, raise families and do business.

Thank you.