



**Pan American  
Health  
Organization**



**World Health  
Organization**  
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE  
**Americas**

## **57th DIRECTING COUNCIL**

***71st SESSION OF THE REGIONAL COMMITTEE OF WHO FOR THE AMERICAS***

*Washington, D.C., USA, 30 September-4 October 2019*

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**OPENING REMARKS BY HON. ALEX M. AZAR II  
SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

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**57th Directing Council of PAHO  
71st session of the WHO Regional Committee for the Americas**

Mr. President,  
Director Etienne,  
Director-General Tedros,  
Fellow Ministers,  
Distinguished leaders,

It is an honor to welcome you all to Washington and to be here with you for the Directing Council.

I especially want to thank you, Dr. Sands, for serving as President of the Directing Council and thank you, Director Etienne, for the invitation to speak to all of you today.

I first want to offer condolences, solidarity, and support from President Trump and the American people to the people and Government of the Bahamas in the wake of Hurricane Dorian.

Americans are all too familiar with the devastation that can result from hurricanes and what it takes to recover. We are committed to doing all we can to assist with recovery efforts.

As I look across the room today, it's good to see familiar faces, both from UNGA recently, and from the close collaboration many of us have shared on health issues over the past year.

As I mentioned in the U.S. Government statement at the High-Level Meeting on Universal Health Coverage, it is important to remember that that the ultimate goal of our collaborative work is better health for all people.

This goal was set forth in the WHO Constitution, the PAHO Constitution, and the resolutions of the U.N. and the World Health Assembly.

But, as we in the Western Hemisphere like to remind our friends in Geneva, PAHO's precursor institutions predate WHO by almost half a century.

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Before the global declarations I referred to, the nations of the Americas had already explicitly dedicated themselves to the work of better health for all throughout our hemisphere.

As the Surgeon General of the U.S. Public Health Service put it in addressing the first meeting of what became the Pan-American Sanitary Conference, in 1902, “No topics are of greater importance than those which will be considered by this conference: protection against the inroads of disease and the providing of such environments of man as will enable him to cultivate the highest standard of health.”

I will note that health was not the first issue that brought the nations of the Americas together.

In fact, before the Americas held our first formal international health conference, earlier in 1902 we held an international conference on the regulation of coffee.

I suppose that isn't a bad rule for international conferences: First, coffee, then move on to everything else.

In all seriousness, we have a proud history of cooperation throughout the Americas on health, and I look forward to continuing that work today.

I want to emphasize that we will do more for our people by coming together on broad areas of agreement where genuine progress can be achieved, as opposed to pursuing divisive policies where we know consensus is not possible.

My job, as the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, is to help all people in the United States attain longer lives and better health.

President Trump has embraced a vision for healthcare that makes better health outcomes a top priority.

The President's vision is a healthcare system for the United States with affordable, personalized, patient-centric care—a system that puts the patient in control, gives the patient peace of mind, and treats the patient like a person, not a number.

While this vision specifically pertains to the United States, we believe its focus on improved health as the ultimate goal is a shared priority for almost every country as they think about the goal of Universal Health Coverage.

Toward that goal, both within our own nations and in international fora such as PAHO, we must draw on the strengths and resources of both the public and private sectors, promoting partnerships that include civil society, NGOs, faith- and community-

based organizations. This multifaceted approach to UHC stands the best chance of delivering high quality care that centers on patients and improves their health.

It also stands the best chance of improving our ability to respond to health emergencies and infectious diseases that can cross borders, such as Ebola and measles, and therefore protecting health for all.

Tragically, we have a large-scale health emergency in our own hemisphere today.

The failed Maduro regime in Venezuela has destroyed that country's economy and health system, sending millions of Venezuelans fleeing to nations throughout the regions. Because the health system has collapsed, these refugees have lacked even basic medical care, like immunizations, and have often seen noncommunicable conditions, like cancer and diabetes, go untreated.

The United States and many of the nations in this room have worked closely together to respond.

I traveled to Colombia earlier this year to see the situation on the ground, and I want to commend the heroic efforts of nations, including Colombia, that have received displaced Venezuelans.

While in Colombia, a number of health ministers agreed to a process for a new regional vaccination card, which will simplify the process of identifying health needs of migrants.

Through the U.S. Agency for International Development, we also recently made a donation of 12,000 units of HIV antiretrovirals to help address unmet need among Venezuelans living with HIV in Colombia.

The United States is already looking ahead to a future where Venezuelans can return to their country, rebuild their health system, and improve the health of their people.

The process of rebuilding is a subject of active planning by the U.S. government and our partners throughout the region.

I want to close by noting that we will be most effective in responding to these kinds of health emergencies by ensuring that our international organizations are focused on preparing for them, and that should be an important element of ongoing work to reform WHO and strengthen PAHO.

We will work with all of you on an agenda for ongoing improvements at WHO and PAHO, making a clear shift to an emphasis on measuring country-level impact by implementing PAHO's new Strategic Plan and WHO's 13th General Program of Work.

I commend the Member States of our region, and PAHO, for their close collaboration to articulate a common vision and shared commitment to advance health in the next PAHO Strategic Plan.

As I said at the outset, advancing health is our ultimate aim. In working toward it, we have much to learn from each other.

By cooperating and remaining focused on the common priorities of our most important health threats, ones that cross borders and demand international cooperation, we will improve the health and prosperity of nations throughout our hemisphere and around the world.

Thank you for your kind attention today.

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