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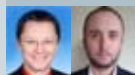
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Health is about how we live

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Allow me to start with a statement that I believe each of you will agree with: Health is a universal value recognized and valued by all, starting from international organizations through national governments, and in-country sectors to individuals. Health underpins social and economic development and strengthens policies across all sectors. However, the economic and fiscal crisis facing many countries, including Slovakia, presents serious challenges and potentially risks undermining the positive progress that has been made. Nevertheless, it also presents an important opportunity to refocus and renew our efforts to improve the health of all people. Good health is essential for economic and social development. It is a vital concern for the lives of every single person, all families and communities. Poor health wastes potential, causes despair, and drains resources across all sectors.

So what are the major challenges for health at present? According to the World Health Organization (WHO), in 2008 an estimated 36 million of the 57 million global deaths were due to non-communicable diseases (NCD), also referred to as chronic diseases. Principally, we are talking about cardiovascular diseases, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases, and diabetes. The number includes about nine million deaths before the age of 60. At the same time, populations are ageing at an unprecedented rate. WHO estimates that within the next five years the population of people aged 65 and older will outnumber children under the age of five for the first time in history. The NCD burden grows with the growing number of elderly people. This constitutes one of the major challenges not only for health and social care services, but also for overall development in the twenty-first century.

The main reason for NCD is human behavior and high disposition to risk factors such as smoking, harmful use of alcohol, lack of physical activity, and an unhealthy diet. This means that the onset of these diseases depends very much on controlling the mentioned risk factors by individuals, but also by international and national bodies and by communities who should set regulatory and legislative frameworks enabling and strengthening healthy choices. WHO has also defined the so-called “determinants of health” that determine the development of NCD apart from the mentioned risk factors. They include social and economic environment, physical environment, access and use of health services to prevent and treat diseases, and individual characteristics – especially health-protecting behavior and health-promoting lifestyles.

Having said all this, I would like to encourage you – as individuals or as corporate leaders – to think how much attention you pay to the prevention of NCD in your families and in your companies. When was the last time you went for a preventive check-up? If you are 50+, have you had a preventive colonoscopy? Have your kids been vaccinated against all vaccine-preventable diseases? Do you have policies in your companies that reduce risk behavior for NCD?

In the 21st century, health is mainly about people and how they live and create health in the context of their everyday lives. This requires a new perspective on the governance of health and well-being. WHO endorsed a global action plan for the prevention and control of NCD for 2013–2020. It comprises a set of actions which, when performed collectively by Member States, United Nations organizations, other international partners and WHO, is intended to set the world on a new course to reduce premature mortality from NCD of 25% by 2025. A very ambitious plan, but apparently based on sufficient evidence that it is feasible, if all players play in a concerted way. Let us think together how we can help achieving it in the Slovak context.

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Darina Sedláková