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Pakistan's Health Policy Forum launched with spectacular participation

Shahina Maqbool

ISLAMABAD: The debut and launching of Pakistan's Health Policy Forum witnessed an unprecedented participation of a wide range of stakeholders from various health sectors within the country here Saturday.

For the first time in the history of 'health' in Pakistan, representatives of the government, private healthcare providers and hospitals, NGOs, the donor community, the pharmaceutical sector, academics, development economists, social sector experts public health professionals and professional societies decided to sit on one forum to resolve issues. Pakistan's Health Policy Forum is the brainchild of Dr. Sania Nishtar, who described it as "a think tank with an institutional mechanism - designed to follow-through intellectual outputs into action."

At the dramatic debut of the Forum held at Islamabad Club, Dr. Sania said the Forum is a platform for synchronizing stakeholder efforts within the health sector, mainstreaming the role of the civil society, people, and the private sector into the decision making process and creating an interface between all stakeholders in the health sector.

Drawing on its think tank capacity to analyze strategic issues, the Forum is envisaged to offer evidence-based, locally feasible

consensus-driven policy solutions, in support of which it will also take an advocacy orientation. It is also expected to serve as a catalyst for change through policy and technical support and will additionally advocate on behalf of the people in addition to promoting accountability of decisions. "We want to join hands to provide solutions; the idea is not to be confrontational but to capitalize on collective thinking and problem solving on democratic principles," Dr. Sania explained. The key ethics and principles of the Forum include its intellectual independence; neutrality, evidence-based and equity orientation and its capacity to produce an indigenous response to health systems issues.

Addressing the august gathering, Secretary Health Anwar Mehmood lauded the initiative and said that the intellectual independence and neutrality of the Forum will be respected. He reiterated his support for the Forum. "We will be a part of this Forum and will walk as far as the Forum wants us to walk; we will not try to dominate the Forum," Anwar Mehmood assured. Speaking on behalf of the Minister for Health, Mohammad Nasir Khan, he said the Minister also believes that such collaborative efforts must be carried forward and has requested the participants to join hands for a cause that is dear to all.

The impressive list of partici-

pants included key Ministry of Health officials; CEOs of private hospitals; vice chancellors of private medical universities such as Dr. Fareed ud Din Baqai and Prof A J Khan; Sameen Siddiqui and Khalif Bile Mohamud from WHO; Mushtaq Khan chief of NHPU; Lieut. Gen. Afzal Ahmed, Surgeon General; Gregory Pappas, Chair CHS, AKU; NGOs including Heartfile, The Network, HANDS, Marie Stopes; development partners from the World Bank, GTZ, DFID, UNICEF and UNAIDS; representatives of the Pakistan Medical Association and many other professional associations.

In addition, President, Pakistan Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association; Chairman, Pharma Bureau and President, Pakistan Pharmaceuticals Medical Directors Association were also present, as were Professors Nasir ud Din Azam Khan, Samad Shera, Malik Mubbashar and Fareed Minhas. Other sectors which impact health were represented by A R Kamal, director PIDE, social scientist Kausar Khan, Agha Nasir from the media and lawyer Aness Jillani.

The next step is the release of the Gateway Paper of the Forum in order to allow an initial assessment of the issues and challenges and to propose possible solutions to bridge gaps. Dr. Sania has taken personal responsibility for this huge task and hopes to release the paper soon.