



Winds of Change at WHO by Juan Carlos Negrette

Jan 20, 2017 12:00 AM
By Juan Carlos Negrette



In the upcoming days, the process of selecting a new Director General for the WHO will accelerate. This year’s election happens at a time in which WHO is reinforcing its support to health systems strengthening as a necessary condition for achieving universal health coverage. Simultaneously, it will continue developing structures and approaches that can rapidly and effectively respond to unexpected health threats in a changing environment and in an increasingly interconnected world.

One of the candidates for the DG position is Dr. Sania Nishtar, a levelheaded person, with informed, solid and well-structured thinking. She is a thorough and logical thinker with an innate ability to explain complex concepts straightforwardly and simply, an attribute very much needed when communicating with audiences having different professional and cultural backgrounds. Particularly important is that her ideas and concepts do not belong just to academia but have been tested by the fire and heat of reality; Sania was a Federal Minister of four portfolios during the recent Caretaker Government of 2013 in Pakistan. When leaving office, she left behind a guiding document - a set of handover papers- for every area she covered. She ardently defended resuscitating the defunct Ministry of Health, explaining in candid terms how lacking such a structure did not bring the anticipated good, but instead, and perhaps not unexpectedly, was deleterious for a country needing to provide health for more than 180 million.

Her publications demonstrate her solid understanding of history’s social and economic forces, which forge healthcare everywhere. Particularly relevant is her comprehensive view of health systems development and issues around the globe. She clearly understands, and more importantly can explain, complex systems and the ways they relate to each other. Her deep understanding of challenging structural issues around health, the complex forces behind politics in Pakistan and the way she addresses them - particularly in her book *Choked Pipes* - make readers recognize their own struggles. Tolstoy said once that if you paint your village, you will paint the whole world; Sania does just that. Her description of how health

has evolved into a right, how this right is determining political agendas and societal change, and how this struggle has marked Pakistan, is an engaging story for everyone.

In a recent trip to Pakistan I had the opportunity to meet her and witness how down-to-earth, focused, and kind she is. I'm sure Sania Nishtar will have to face equally qualified contenders for one of the most coveted positions in the world. That said, she refreshingly displays the attributes required and strengths needed for effective global leadership and she is comfortably a role model for younger generations, not just women in Asia but women and men all over the world.

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