

***Lyonchhen Tshering Tobgay's Speech during the 16th Annual Medical Sciences Update, Lifestyle Diseases: The Enemy Within at IMTRAT, Thimphu
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General Bato Tshering, Chief of Army
Maj. General Anbu, IMTRAT Commander
Lieutenant General Chakravarty
Friends and Doctors, lifesavers
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honor to be here. I am deeply honored to be here in the Opening Session of the 16th Annual Medical Sciences Update.

During the next few days, experts, doctors, health experts, lifesavers will talk about improving the health and well being of the people of Bhutan. You will compare notes and you will draw strategies to improve the well being of the Bhutanese people. I want to wish you well. I want to wish you well especially because you have chosen the theme, a theme that is extremely significant, a theme that is timely for Bhutan; 'Lifestyle diseases: The enemy within.' It is truly an enemy and like any enemy, all of us must work hard to combat it.

In Bhutan, we have enjoyed tremendous successes in the health sector. Just 30 years ago, it would be difficult to see any old person in Bhutan and anybody reaching the age of 60 was considered old. 30 years ago, our average life expectancy at birth was barely 47 years. Today it is 71 years.

30-40 years ago, for every 1000 live births, I think about 142 babies were dying. Today, barely 40 die. Mothers were dying too. For every 100,000 mothers, we had 10,000 mothers i.e. 7.7% that were dying needlessly. Today that rate has fallen drastically to 2.6 mothers only. This success as I mentioned earlier is translated to a healthier life that we can enjoy for a longer period. Instead of expecting to live just 47 years, today our children can expect to live 71 years. And even today, when our parents and our relatives are on their deathbeds, at 70 years, we think it's too early that they are dying at a very young age. This success has been achieved largely because of the vision, wisdom, courage and commitment of our beloved Monarchs especially His Majesty the Fourth Druk Gyalpo and His Majesty the King. They have worked tirelessly to ensure that people throughout our country could access primary healthcare. Our successes at primary healthcare are recognized all over the world and our successes is largely because our health workers, doctors and soldiers here have worked together to realize the vision of His Majesty the King.

In this endeavor, I must also thank IMTRAT. You have also played a very significant role in ensuring that the Bhutanese people have access to appropriate healthcare in a timely fashion. Whether it is the IMTRAT Hospitals, Army Hospitals and Government hospitals, the fact of the matter is we in Bhutan have enjoyed more than our share of successes in the health sector. Today, however, we are faced with growing challenges in lifestyle diseases. There's no better way to describe non-communicable lifestyle diseases but 'an enemy within.'

It is going to be expensive to fight this enemy.

Primary healthcare is a very complicated matter, it is also expensive but with the will, you can fight it. A polio drop costs Nu. 50 and as long as that polio drop is administered, you guarantee the child a life free of polio. A MMR vaccine costs again Nu. 50, if you suffer from diarrhea, ORS or maybe an antibiotic would cost you about Nu. 75. If you have some respiratory diseases at an early stage, some viral infection, maybe again Nu.75 for some paracetamols and anti-histamine. If that should become complicated and you are at early stages of pneumonia and other bacterial complications, another Nu. 200 worth of antibiotics would take care of it. That's how actually inexpensive primary healthcare is.

But, lifestyle diseases are a different matter. If you have high blood pressure, as indeed many of my friends, acquaintances and families have higher blood pressure, you're popping pills every month and costing the government at least Nu. 500 a month. God forbid, you suffer a stroke, and then you can spend like my friend recently, 1 month in an ICU and spend several more months in a hospital. If you suffer from diabetes, about Nu. 450-500 a month on drugs. Should your kidneys fail, dialysis would cost Nu. 2500 per session and we need at least 3 sessions a week and that's Nu. 7,500 a week. That's about Nu. 3000 a month just in dialysis. Should you go for a transplant, a kidney transplant should cost you anything from Nu. 600, 000-1,200,000 for the procedure and then anything from Nu. 120,000 upwards per year for the rest of your life to ensure that the donor organ is not rejected. There are many other lifestyle diseases and I don't want to even go anywhere near heart attacks and cardiac arrests.

Just today, we had a patient air-lifted from Lunana, a victim of a stray arrow strike. It took 4 days to get him here and a MI17 helicopter made 2 attempts and 2 helicopters stood in the Paro airfield for 3 days and made four attempts. Altogether, it must have cost lakhs just to rescue this one individual. This is the nature of lifestyle diseases. It is expensive. But it is also preventable. This is why we must treat as an enemy and we must address it head on.

Four years ago, I cycled and I took part in the first *Tour of the Dragon Race*. It starts from Bumthang and ends in Thimphu in one day. It's 268 kilometers in one day. I learned several things from participating in this race and the first thing I learned is that *'I am a fool'*. Because when I reached Trongsa, about 68kms from start, I fell off my bike and broke my jaw but I continued and completed the race. So, in retrospect when I think of myself, I think of myself as a fool, as an idiot for getting back on my bike and attempting to complete the race. But I completed the race. In hindsight, I also learnt that a strong heart is extremely important. It was my strong heart and I mean it literally, I don't mean guts, I don't mean courage and I don't mean stamina. I mean, literally, a physically strong heart that allowed me to complete my race in spite of the fact that I had shattered my jaw. Thank god, I didn't know that I'd shattered my jaw. When I reached Thimphu and then I was evacuated. I have some plastic surgery done on my jaw and I had to replace most of my teeth, it cost the government a lot of money. Preventable but cost the government a lot of money.

After a 4 and a half hour operation, I was in the ICU. I woke up drowsy and then I heard the ICU specialist ask my wife, "Is he an athlete?" My wife said, "Not really, why do you ask?" The ICU attendant said, "His heart is extremely strong. He has a heart of an athlete and you can rest assured he's going to recover in no time." And I recovered in no time. I was drowsy but I heard this conversation.

This was four years ago, ladies and gentlemen, and since then I have realized and I have accepted that you require the importance of a strong heart. The only to get a strong heart is '*exercise*'. Yes, you should be careful with your diet, eat a balanced diet, don't eat excessively and as Doctor Ugyen Dophu says, "Don't eat salt unnecessarily.'

If you drink, drink moderately and I am told that a glass of red wine is good for your heart but go beyond that. Smoking and eating tobacco is a '*No*.' I see heads shaking. But most of all, exercise to take care of your heart. If you exercise half an hour everyday, during which you perspire and you can break into a sweat, you have a strong enough heart so that, one day, if you are ever in the ICU, you will recover. But more importantly, you will not have to go to hospital unless you are a fool like me and have been in an accident. You are not prone to lifestyle diseases, whether it is your kidney, your liver, hypertension and of course, your heart.

I am at the risk of lecturing to the Lord Buddha himself, I am going through this more as a narrative of personal experience. I am sharing with you my own journey. Not necessarily to the doctors here who know more than me, much more than me and I will never know as much as you. Not to you, because you are the ones who are saving lives and you are in the forefront of fighting that enemy within. I share my story so that we can understand the nature of the beast and understand the nature of that enemy. This enemy is dangerous, unpredictable, expensive, unnecessary but also preventable. This beast, the lifestyle diseases, if there's anything that's absolutely contrary to the principles, ideals and vision of Gross National Happiness, it has to be lifestyle diseases; that enemy within.

Generals, Doctors, Ladies and Gentlemen, I want to thank you for spending time and participating in these very important consultations. I wish you well and I know that your consultations will be a success and that you will be able to frame recommendations to the Royal Government of Bhutan; recommendations that will help us collectively fight the enemy within. On my part, I guarantee you that I will take your recommendations and your wisdom very seriously.

Thank you and Tashi Delek.