

**WELCOME REMARKS BY DR. YANKUBA KASSAMA**  
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**ON THE OCCASION OF THE 2019 AFRICA HEALTHY LIFESTYLE DAY**  
**COMMEMORATION.**

**THEME: HEALTHY LIFESTYLE PROLONGS LIFE**

*Addis Ababa, 7<sup>th</sup> March 2019*

**Your Excellency, Ambassador Thomas Kwesi Quartey, AUC Deputy Chairperson,**

**Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.**

It is my honor and privilege to welcome you all to the 2019 Africa Healthy Lifestyle Day commemoration under the theme “**Healthy Lifestyle Prolongs Life**”, a concept that emphasises the significant relationship between unhealthy lifestyle and premature deaths.

This day is usually commemorated on the last Friday of February each year to raise awareness on non-communicable diseases and encourage AU staff and Member States to adopt healthy living as a way of life. Non Communicable diseases are non-contagious diseases which are often chronic in nature. These include High blood pressure (Hypertension), Cardiovascular diseases, Diabetes Mellitus, Dyslipidemia (abnormal levels or proportion of fat in the blood), various cancers, chronic respiratory diseases and injuries.

Non-communicable diseases account for 70% of all deaths each year. This group of diseases have common risk factors which include tobacco use, poor dietary choices, obesity, excessive alcohol consumption and physical inactivity. By avoiding these risk factors in the first place, we can prevent the majority of deaths due to non-communicable diseases.

It is a well-known fact that how long we live is to some extent dependent on our genetic constitution. However, research over time has shown that there

are some recognized attitudes and behaviors that promote health and give us the best chance to achieve as long a life as possible. The evidence for the importance of healthy lifestyles is now overwhelming. Researchers found that people who maintained healthy lifestyles lived more than a decade longer than those who did not. I think this is enough motivation for anyone to want to adopt a healthy lifestyle.

A healthy lifestyle is one that promotes these beneficial attitudes and behaviors that include eating a varied and nutritious diet, exercising regularly, avoiding smoking cigarettes and excessive consumption of alcohol. It also includes eliminating stress from our life and maintaining a healthy body weight. The aforementioned lifestyle impacts not only on how long we live, but on how well we will live.

We know that lifestyle-related chronic diseases are placing an increasing burden on health systems around the world, especially in low- and middle-income countries like ours. What is urgently required is to encourage and create policies that make healthy choices easier for people. The benefits are there, they are real, they are measurable and they are cost effective.

For example, to increase physical activity, the population has to be educated on the importance of physical activity and a safe place has to be provided to be physically active. But if we do not have the safe environment, people will naturally not engage in physical activity in spite of an effective education program.

Healthy meals should be readily available and affordable. Increasing our fruit and vegetable consumption can reduce the risk of colon cancer by up to 50%. Eat your food as your medicines, otherwise you have to eat your medicines as your food. Research findings have shown that good dietary choices and increased level of physical activity improve the health of entire

communities. It is interesting to note that just 30 minutes of moderate physical activity each day, that is the equivalent of a brisk walk, can reduce our risk of a heart attack by up to 50%. Obviously, these changes are real and they are achievable.

### **Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

A multi-component series of interventions such as heavily taxing tobacco and alcohol, subsidizing the use of public transport and building bicycle lanes have been shown to effect real behaviour change. For instance, increasing the taxation on cigarettes has a huge effect on the consumption of tobacco. Education campaigns, banning the advertisement of cigarettes, restricting the sale and access to cigarettes are equally important in ensuring healthy lifestyle.

### **Excellences, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is quite unfortunate that over the years, healthcare systems generally have focused primarily on disease treatment rather than prevention. Chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease and cancer are the commonest and costliest of all health problems but are largely preventable.

Fortunately, the MHSD prioritizes disease prevention and hence organizes at least four Public Health campaigns and free screening for priority diseases at different times during each year. It also uses conventional and innovative methods to reach the AU Organs and Regional Offices.

To this end, I would like to thank the MIS Team under the leadership of Mme Rekia Mahammadou for their support in ensuring that we have regular video conferences on health issues with the various AU Offices all over the World. (I think they deserve an applause for this).

We look forward, in addition to strengthening our collaboration with our DIC colleagues for live streaming of our events, sharing and interaction on social media. Our goal is to leverage on technology and reach as many staff and their families as possible.

The Medical and Health Services Directorate also looks forward to continued collaboration with the Facility Management Division to ensure that healthy food is served within the AU Commission premises. We wish to express our support to the Bureau of AU Staff Association for providing the AU Gymnasium to ensure that staff are encouraged to go for regular physical exercise.

The AUC leadership and AHRM may wish to consider setting aside a certain day or period of the week for compulsory open air aerobics, Zumba dance, Yoga or walks etc as a means of enforcing a healthy lifestyle and relieving stress.

**Your Excellency, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

In closing, I will like to reemphasize that adopting a healthy lifestyle will substantially reduce premature deaths and prolong life expectancy. At the Medical and Health Services Directorate, encouraging clients to adopt a healthy lifestyle is a top priority and it is an indispensable part of our healthcare delivery system.

I thank you all for your kind attention.