



WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the first meeting of the WHO Science Council

27 April 2021

Professor Varmus, council members,

Let me begin by offering my deep gratitude to all of you for agreeing to be part of WHO's Science Council.

And my thanks to Professor Varmus for agreeing to chair this very important group.

As you know, science has always been central to WHO's mission and mandate, as an evidence-based organization.

One of WHO's unique strengths is our convening power to bring together the world's foremost experts in any area of health to analyze the evidence and distil it into guidance.

Everything we do is grounded in science, from the normative, standard-setting products we develop, the prequalification of medicines, the classification of diseases and our response to global health crises like COVID-19.

After my election as Director-General almost four years ago, we embarked on a deep-rooted transformation of WHO.

A key part of that transformation has been to strengthen WHO's scientific work, so that we are not just keeping up with the latest scientific developments, but staying ahead of the curve and harnessing the best science for global health.

Two year ago we established a new science division, and appointed WHO's first Chief Scientist, Dr Soumya Swaminathan.

Within the Science Division, we have established a new Global Health Foresight function, to anticipate developments in science and technology, and harness their potential for public health.

This Science Council is the latest step.

Never has science been so critical for addressing challenges to global health.

From the identification of the first cases of COVID-19 to the sequencing of the virus, the rapid development of vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics, to the application of public health and social measures, science has underpinned the response at every stage.

Science saves lives. And conversely, when science has been ignored, the virus has spread and lives have been lost.

The pandemic has taught us that science is not an abstract intellectual pursuit; it can be the difference between life and death.

The pandemic has also demonstrated that although science can deliver life-saving solutions, there are many other factors that determine whether or not all people are able to enjoy the benefits of science.

So it's my great honour to formally launch the WHO Science Council as the voice of scientific leadership, and we are delighted to have such an eminent and diverse group of scientists.

Each of you represents the highest expertise in your domain, but you also bring invaluable experience, know-how and insight.

We anticipate that this council will have several functions:

First, to evaluate urgent, high-priority scientific issues, and provide input and guidance on translating them to public health guidelines.

Second, to identify emerging issues in science and technology that WHO needs to address, including global health threats, and advances with a potential for a direct or indirect impact on global health;

Third, to provide strategic direction to WHO's work in science, research and innovation;

And fourth, to participate as needed in the rapid review of WHO's normative products.

Thank you all once again for your commitment and support. I look forward to this first discussion.

As Louis Pasteur famously said, “Science knows no country, because knowledge belongs to humanity, and is the torch which illuminates the world.”

Thank you.

Subscribe to the WHO newsletter →