

**Opening Remarks by the Commonwealth Secretary General  
34<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting 2022**

*“The Road to COVID-19 Recovery: Lessons Learnt for Building Health System Resilience to advance UHC and Health Security in the Commonwealth”*

[Check against delivery]

Your Excellency Dr Christopher Tifton, the Chair of CHMM,

Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, dear colleagues and friends,

Good morning, good afternoon and good evening to you all.

It is a great privilege to be with you today as we begin the 34<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting.

I offer my thanks and gratitude to Honourable Minister Dr Christopher Tufton, who, alongside his delegation, has graciously joined us at Marlborough House to Chair this meeting.

This is the third time we are convening Commonwealth Health Ministers since the WHO declared the public health emergency of international concern regarding the spread of COVID-19.

I would like us to just take a moment to reflect on that first meeting, and that first year in which all of our lives were transformed.

In May 2020, at the 32<sup>nd</sup> Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting, our societies, economies and governments were under threat. We had much to learn about COVID-19, and the effect it could have on our populations. We were uncertain, even fearful, about what the next year, or years, could bring.

In those moments, we came together in grief for those we have lost.

We came together in solidarity with those on the frontlines, for the healthcare professionals who have sacrificed so much, and continue to make sacrifices, to keep us safe.

Most importantly, we came together united on a commitment to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic as a Commonwealth.

I remember quite clearly that those early meetings we had in 2020, whilst full of trepidation, were brimming with hope and determination for what we could achieve together.

Now, two years on, we carry the weight of 90 million cases across the Commonwealth.

We carry the grief of more than one million lives lost to COVID across our family of nations.

We carry forward what we have learned. Our understanding of COVID-19 and its effects has moved on in leaps and bounds

And we carry forward an ever-deeper understanding of the need for global cooperation.

We must work together. We have seen what we can achieve with unity; and we have seen the dangers and challenges to our societies without it.

As we meet today under the theme: *“The Road to COVID-19 Recovery: Lessons Learnt for Building Health System Resilience to advance UHC and Health Security in the Commonwealth”*, we know our task: to take forward what we have learned together, so that we can protect our populations for the future.

The pandemic continues to be a profound crisis in our world - the most vivid and tragic example of the devastation that catastrophe can cause to lives and livelihoods around the world.

But as well as being a distinctive threat, COVID-19 exposed the inherent weaknesses and inequities in our health systems - as a Commonwealth, and as a global community.

Even countries with the most advanced health systems have been forced to grapple with severe disruption to essential services and primary health care.

For many low and middle-income countries, these disruptions were magnified, and progress toward pre-pandemic commitments on urgent priorities such as malaria and neglected tropical diseases have been inhibited.

And our response to COVID-19 has illustrated inequity - especially on the distribution of vaccines.

More than 1.3 billion people across the Commonwealth are fully vaccinated. That is an extraordinary achievement.

Yet more than 40% of the population of the Commonwealth are yet to receive even a single dose. Access to vaccines is so unequal that, in some of the Africa's least developed Commonwealth countries, vaccination rates remain less than 15%.

We know there is some hesitancy, but there are problems associated with distribution issues, fragile health systems, work force capacity, and logistics, that we can overcome if we work together.

Failing to overcome these solvable problems will fatally undermine collective efforts to vaccinate 70% of the population of each country by the middle of this year.

As we begin to look beyond the pandemic, we can see the need for more resilient health systems with more clarity than ever.

We must ensure that our health systems are well-prepared, well-resourced and flexible enough to absorb the shocks caused by health-related emergencies.

It also means that we must address the issues in human resourcing for health, so that our workforces are sufficiently supported to keep our populations safe.

Universal Health Coverage and Global Health Security - both central parts of our theme today - are critical factors.

We have learned to view UHC and health security as two sides of the same coin - and we all know they require sufficient, sustainable financing.

Our colleagues and friends at the World Health Organization have led the way in helping the international system to recognise that an integrated approach to progressing these complementary goals will be critical as we move forward.

I thank the W.H.O, especially my dear brother, Dr Tedros, for their leadership and skill in the years since the pandemic began.

And I am proud of our new Memorandum of Understanding with the W.H.O which we signed in February.

It reflects our joint commitment to collaborate more meaningfully to tackle the health challenges faced by Commonwealth countries - and I am confident it will offer Commonwealth countries tangible benefits on critical health issues.

Our ultimate goal is a shared one: to work together to accelerate progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in 2030, and ensure that no one is left behind.

I look forward to hearing the thoughts on all Honourable Ministers over today and the 19<sup>th</sup> for how we can achieve this, including the right interventions and practices that can be implemented to accelerate our progress.

As with all Commonwealth meetings, what we bring and what we take away are both of value and importance.

It is our special ability as a family of nations to come together, across regions, nations and sectors to work together to deliver health for all and ensure a healthier and more equitable Commonwealth.

Each has something to offer, all have something to gain.

And as a Secretariat, we are ready to support in whatever way we can.

It is my hope that by the time we leave this meeting, we will have a greater sense of what we can do as a Commonwealth to learn the valuable lessons COVID-19 that has taught us:

In addressing the glaring health inequalities faced by low and middle-income countries.

In re-focusing efforts towards our CHOGM and SDG health commitments.

In strengthening our global coordination and cooperation to counter health emergencies.

In recognising the need to build a strong primary health care foundation for resilient systems for UHC and health security.

And in knowing that an investment in health, is an investment for all of society.

With every crisis, there is an opportunity. After all we have lost from COVID-19, we must take what we can from this experience to improve the lives and livelihoods of our populations.

We now have an opportunity to shape the kind of Commonwealth that we want. A Commonwealth that is healthy, equitable and safe.

Let us come together now to chart our path forwards.

I thank you.