

Report on the First Regional Conference on Health in North-East India-2024, *Advancing Health Equity: Bridging the Gaps*

I. Introduction: The First Regional Conference on Health in Northeast India, themed "Advancing Health Equity: Bridging the Gaps," convened health experts, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners to address the diverse health challenges prevalent in the Northeast region of India. Organized collaboratively by the National Lutheran Health and Medical Board (NLHMB), Department of Allied Health Sciences, MLCU, Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, Martin Luther Christian University (MLCU), and the Indian Institute of Public Health, Shillong, the conference aimed to foster collaboration, knowledge exchange, and innovative solutions towards achieving sustainable health and well-being in the region.

II. Inaugural Session: The conference commenced with a prestigious inaugural session attended by distinguished guests including Shri Sampath Kumar IAS, Principal Secretary of Health and Family Welfare, Government of Meghalaya, and Dr. Glenn C. Kharkongor, Chancellor of the University and Executive Director of NLHMB. Dr. Kharkongor emphasized the imperative to tailor health management strategies to address the unique needs of vulnerable populations in the Northeast. Shri Sampath Kumar shed light on the multifaceted health challenges facing Meghalaya and underscored the importance of grassroots initiatives and community engagement in revitalizing the local health system. The session concluded with a poignant quote emphasizing the essence of compassion and service in healthcare.

III. Technical Sessions: The conference featured five expert-led technical sessions focusing on key health issues prevalent in the Northeast region:

- 1. Malaria in Meghalaya:** Dr. Rajiv and his team from the Indian Institute of Public Health, Shillong, presented findings from the CSCMI study, shedding light on mosquito species diversity, epidemiology, and tailored strategies for malaria control and elimination.
- 2. Out-of-Pocket Expenditure on Healthcare:** Dr. Caleb Harris, Additional Professor and HOD, Surgical Oncology at NEIGRIHMS, shared insights into the significant burden of out-of-pocket healthcare expenses on households, particularly in the context of diseases like cancer, emphasizing the need for preventive measures and lifestyle interventions.
- 3. Health Education:** Dr. Shaibya Saldanha, Consultant Gynaecologist and Trainer, Government of Meghalaya, highlighted the importance of health education and literacy in empowering individuals to make informed health choices and seek appropriate healthcare services.
- 4. Indigenous Health Practices:** Dr. Alka Kharsati, Traditional Healer, underscored the value of traditional healing practices prevalent among the communities of the Khasi, emphasizing the need for their formal recognition and integration into the healthcare system to preserve indigenous knowledge and improve health outcomes.
- 5. HIV and Substance Abuse:** Dr. Himashree Bhattacharyya, Associate Professor, Community & Family Medicine, AIIMS Guwahati, discussed the complex challenges

associated with HIV and substance abuse in the region, emphasizing the importance of comprehensive strategies encompassing prevention, management, and stigma reduction.

IV. Paper and Poster Presentations: The conference showcased a diverse array of research through paper and poster presentations, covering topics ranging from cancer incidence and food safety to WASH practices and traditional birth preparedness. Notable presentations included studies on cancer epidemiology, food safety knowledge among street food vendors, and district-wise analysis of home-based newborn care.

V. Panel Discussion: Vaccination in Meghalaya: Challenges and Solutions: A thought-provoking panel discussion moderated by Ms. Patricia Mukhim, Editor of Shillong Times, delved into the challenges and solutions about vaccination uptake in Meghalaya. Panellists, including Dr. Sandra Albert, Director of the Indian Institute of Public Health, Shillong, Ms. Mayfereen Ryntathiang, Founder and President, Grassroot, Shillong, Dr. Valerie J. Laloo, Public Health Specialist, State Immunization Cell Cum State Surveillance Officer (IDSP), and Dr. Glenn C. Kharkongor, Chancellor, MLCU, witnessed an enthusiastic participation along with queries from the audiences. The discussion touched upon various challenges, and solutions were proposed. Pointing out that it is a long overdue discussion, Ms. Mayfereen welcomed the opportunity for deliberation on this important topic. She suggested that one of the solutions could be the social financing option, which can help improve the immunization rate, and stressed the act of consent rather than an act of fear by the community. Dr. Valerie Laloo listed challenges of immunization, which included literacy level, communication skills by the health providers, and financial situations of the households. She informed that Meghalaya, at present, has 85% full immunization coverage. Dr. Sandra spoke about the trust issues related to healthcare access and mindset change. She reiterated the importance of communication skills at the community level. Dr. Glenn highlighted the importance of key members in the community, which include the TBAs and the religious leaders, who can actively help promote immunization in the community. He further added that the crucial person for immunization is the mother. Ms. Patricia reminded that the Rangbah Shnong (headmen) and the politician can perhaps participate actively in this endeavour.

Valedictory Program: The conference concluded with a valedictory program, wherein certificates were distributed to participants and attendees, acknowledging their contributions towards advancing health equity in Northeast India. It was encouraging to see that students and young professionals were winners of best presenters. Cash awards were presented to 2 winners of best oral presenters, 2 for best poster presenters, and 1 special award. Ms. Prasanna Chettri, Sikkim Manipal College of Physiotherapy (SMCPT), and Ms. Susie Kurbah, Indian Institute of Public Health Shillong, bagged the best oral presenter awards. Ms. Siwani Agarwal, Sikkim Manipal College of Physiotherapy, and Ms. Quinnie Nongrum, Meghalaya Health System Strengthening Project, received the best poster presenter awards, while a special award was given to Ms. Grace Ibakordor Thongney, Martin Luther Christian University.

VII. Key note speakers:

Keynote speakers for the 2-day regional conference were the following:

1. Dr. Sandra Albert, Director, Indian Institute of Public Health, Shillong
2. Dr. Alka Kharsati, Traditional Healer
3. Dr. Shaibya Saldanha, Consultant Gynaecologist and Trainer, Government of Meghalaya
4. Dr. Caleb Harris, Additional Professor and Hod, Surgical Oncology at NEIGRIHMS
5. Dr. Himashree Bhattacharyya, Associate Professor, Community & Family Medicine, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Guwahati

VIII. Conclusion: The First Regional Conference on Health in Northeast India served as a pivotal platform for stakeholders to collectively address health disparities, share best practices, and foster collaborations towards achieving health equity and well-being in the region. Moving forward, sustained efforts must be made to translate discussions and insights from the conference into actionable strategies that prioritize community engagement, cultural sensitivity, and innovative approaches in healthcare delivery.



Figure 1: Sampath Kumar, IAS, Principal Secretary, Health and Family Welfare as the Chief guest



Figure 2: Poster presentations



Figure 3: Panel discussion



Figure 4: Discussion after presentation



Figure 5: Winners of the oral and poster presentations



Figure 6: Group picture on the closing day

Organizing Team:

Chairperson – Dr. Larilin Kharpuri, Deputy Executive Director, NLHMB

Co-Chairperson – Dr. Rajiv Sarkar, Faculty, IIPH, Shillong

Co-Chairperson- Dr. Rennie Orson Lakadong, Director Academics, NLHMB

Secretary – Dr. Colleen Sonia Pariat, HoD, Department of Allied Health Sciences, MLCU

Scientific Committee:

Dr. Eliza Dutta, Faculty, IIPH, Shillong

Dr. Lewaka Plain, Faculty, Department of Allied Health Sciences, MLCU

Dr. Minorita Lyngdoh, Associate Dean, Research, MLCU

Dr. Melodynia Marpna, HoD, Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, MLCU

Dr. Nandaris Marwein, Faculty, School of Social Work, MLCU