

Mr. Kamallesh Sharma
Secretary-General
The Commonwealth Secretariat
Marlborough House
Pall Mall
London SW1Y 5HX

12 November 2012

Dear Secretary-General

Concern on the proposed removal of health from the Commonwealth list of priority areas

We write as members of the UK Non-Communicable Disease and Development Task Force to express our urgent and grave concerns regarding the proposal to remove health from the priority areas of the Commonwealth Secretariat in the strategic plan for 2013 to 2016.

This is a crucial time for the health prospects of the populations of all countries – in particular the low-income and middle-income Commonwealth Member States. The post 2015 Development agenda is under review and, despite the strong links between health and development, there are no guarantees that health will feature as a priority in the new framework. At the same time, all Commonwealth member states are facing an increasing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The abandonment of Health as a focus for Commonwealth Secretariat activity will have a detrimental effect on the populations in Commonwealth countries.

The Commonwealth has played an instrumental leadership, governance and accountability role in many significant areas of global health, including galvanising support for the UN High Level Meeting on NCDs. This was an excellent achievement of which we are sure you are proud as this was only the second time a health issue had been raised to this level. It seems strange and anomalous that after such a magnificent effort, health should no longer be a priority and the health section removed. Its convening role is unique, and complementary to that of the World Health Organization (as indicated by the examples cited in the Appendix to this letter) and there is no substitute for it. Commonwealth Member States cannot afford to lose the advantage of having an effective and productive Commonwealth Health Section at this time, nor the luxury of closing down a strategically important asset only to have to re-establish it in the near future in order to address the predicted increase in NCDs.

We strongly recommend that what the Health Section needs is reform and resourcing, not removal. We urge that the decision to abandon the focus on health should be reversed. We would be happy to provide practical support to the Health Section in the development of a protocol work programme that will enable it to address the health needs of Commonwealth Member States more meaningfully. Key roles in global health could include:

- Developing tools to help Commonwealth health ministers and governments take action on the common determinants of health and sustainable development
- Offering technical assistance to all Commonwealth Member States to help them draw up and implement national NCD Action Plans
- Undertaking an audit on adherence to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control
- Facilitating skills sharing and knowledge transfer through Partnerships and Fellowships, and providing a forum for governments to exchange best practice
- Capacity building for global health in areas such as scientific research in developing countries
- Helping the Commonwealth Member States develop coherent and workable policies around Universal Health Care Coverage
- Vigorous advocacy for the place of health in the proposed sustainability development goals.

We urge you and your colleagues meeting this week in London to give this matter the most serious consideration and are willing to discuss and develop these issues further with you at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely



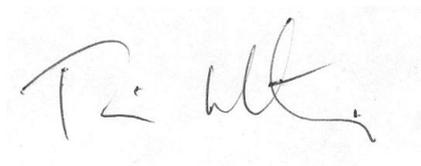
Mr Paul Lincoln, Chief Executive, National Heart Forum*



Mr Mark Lodge, Director, International Network for Cancer Treatment and Research UK



Mr Marc Wortman, Chief Executive, Alzheimer's Disease International



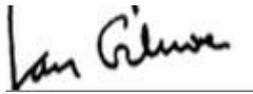
Dr Tim Lobstein, Policy Director, International Association for the Study of Obesity



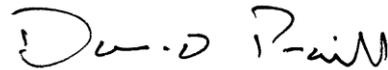
Professor Neil Pearce, Director, Centre for Global NCDs, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine



Sir Richard Thompson, President, Royal College of Physicians, UK



Sir Ian Gilmore, Chair, Alcohol Health Alliance
UK



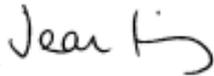
Mr David Prall, Chief Executive Officer, Help
the Hospices



Mr Robin Ireland, Chief Executive, Heart of
Mersey



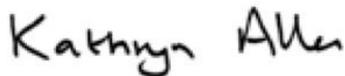
Ms Jo Hopkins, Chief Executive, World Child
Cancer



Dr Jean King, Policy Director, Cancer Research
UK



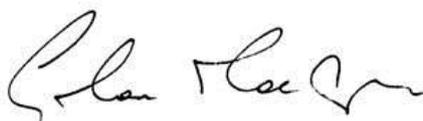
Ms Sharon Baxter, Trustee, Worldwide
Palliative Care Alliance



Dr Kate Allen, Director (Science and
Communications), World Cancer Research
Fund International



Professor Shah Ebrahim, South Asia Network
for Chronic Disease, Public Health Foundation
of India and LSHTM



Professor Graham MacGregor, Chairman,
World Action on Salt and Health

Cc: Her Majesty The Queen, Head of the Commonwealth

High Commissioners of Commonwealth Member States to the United Kingdom

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Appendix

Examples of recent major contributions of the Commonwealth Health Section

1. The Commonwealth led the call for a High-level summit on NCDs, leading up to the UNHLM on the Prevention and Control of NCDs.
2. The development and implementation of the Commonwealth Code of Practice for the International Recruitment of Health Workers which led to the development of the WHO Global Code of Practice
3. In 2010 the Commonwealth Secretariat brought the issue of maternal and child health to the attention of the G8 and G20, thus bringing to the highest global attention issues affecting poor developing countries
4. In 2011, the Commonwealth Secretariat assisted member states most affected by HIV/AIDS to explore ways of aligning their national strategies and policies to the international commitments of the High-level 2011 Political Declaration on AIDS. The Secretariat's leadership and record on human rights is critical in spearheading pertinent discussions on HIV/AIDS and human rights, which are critical to effective service delivery.
5. The Secretariat has been able to develop strategic partnerships with the leading global agencies addressing HIV/AIDS, malaria and TB, with a view to adding value to the global response to these health challenges.