

South & Southeast Asian Nations unite to strengthen health research systems through collaboration

Representatives from Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, and India met to boost collaboration, align health research with policy, and build sustainable, future-ready health systems in South and Southeast Asia

Countries commit to joint action on regional health priorities, leading efforts in One Health, pandemic preparedness, infectious diseases, NCDs, maternal health, and medical innovation

ICMR offers shared tools and training to support emerging research systems, as countries agree on structured collaboration through regular meetings, exchange visits, and joint capacity-building in key research areas

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The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), Department of Health Research (DHR), convened representatives from Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste, and India at Sushma Swaraj Bhawan, New Delhi, yesterday for a high-level regional dialogue on strengthening health research systems. The meeting marked an important milestone in fostering collaboration across South and Southeast Asia to ensure that health research directly informs policy, addresses regional priorities, and builds sustainable systems for the future.



The deliberations were enriched by the presence of eminent experts and dignitaries, with sessions chaired by Dr V.K. Paul, Member, NITI Aayog, Shri Amit Agrawal, Secretary, Department of Pharmaceuticals, Dr Rajeev Singh Raghuvanshi, Drugs Controller General of India, Prof. Dr K. Srinath Reddy, Honorary Distinguished Professor, Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI), Dr Shamika Ravi, Member, Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM), Dr Shivkumar Kalyanaraman, CEO, Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF), Shri Rajesh Bhushan, Former Secretary, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare and Dr Renu Swarup, Former Secretary, Department of Biotechnology.

Sharing India's progress in med-tech innovation, Shri Amit Agrawal, Secretary, Department of Pharmaceuticals, who chaired a session on the subject, stated that, "India today stands at the forefront of scientific research and innovation for health. I urge our research platform partners to actively engage with India's open innovation platforms, so that together we can nurture start-ups, accelerate MedTech breakthroughs, and deliver affordable solutions that serve both economic growth and the larger public good."



Speaking at the way forward session of the meeting, Dr. Rajiv Bahl, Secretary DHR & Director-General, ICMR, stated that “Global partnerships and science diplomacy have always been central to India’s strategy. South–South collaboration remains a priority through joint projects and capacity building to ensure that the region benefits from each other’s expertise. Above all, science and research must serve people directly.”



The representatives reached a consensus on several fronts:

- **South–South Collaboration:** Countries agreed that regional cooperation is essential to tackle common challenges such as antimicrobial resistance (AMR), non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and One Health.
- **Pooling Resources & Expertise:** Joint efforts in medical technology innovation, field epidemiology

training, ethics, and quality assurance were identified as priority areas.

- **Bridging Research & Policy:** Participants committed to formal mechanisms for research–policy dialogue, ensuring that scientific evidence is translated into effective programmes.

ICMR offered to share its tools and resources, including common ethics review forms and free online training courses, so that countries at nascent stages of building research systems can adapt them without having to start from scratch. Looking ahead, countries agreed to establish structured mechanisms for collaboration, including annual/biannual convenings, exchange visits, and joint capacity-building programmes in research methods, ethics, grant writing, and science communications.

The meeting concluded with a collective commitment to move from knowledge-sharing to joint action, with each country exploring opportunities to lead on specific thematic areas such as One Health, Pandemic Preparedness, Infectious Diseases, Vector Borne Diseases, Non-communicable diseases, maternal health, and medical innovation ensuring that health research across the region directly responds to regional needs and priorities.



The event was also attended by Dr. Vishwajeet Kumar, Founder & CEO of Community Empowerment Lab and several senior leaders from ICMR including Dr Sanghamitra Pati, Smt Manisha Saxena, Dr R.S. Dhaliwal, Dr Roli Mathur, Dr Taruna Madan, Dr Tanvir Kaur, and Dr Nivedita Gupta, who steered discussions as moderators.

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