

Press Release: LETS TALK CANCER IN THE NORTH EAST
26 July 2016

The Wellcome Trust/DBT India Alliance and the Indian Institute of Public Health Shillong organised a public engagement event “**Let’s Talk Cancer in the North East**” on **26 July 2016** at the State Convention Centre, Shillong, to discuss the issue of cancer in the north east. This event is part of **Voices for Health**, an initiative that aims to celebrate biomedical research, discuss its impact and to create better understanding of public health issues in the country. The event assumes significance in light of growing incidence of cancer in India and particularly in the North East.

India’s emergence as a fast growing economy and its consequential change in lifestyle-related behaviours are partially responsible for the country’s increasing cancer burden. This disease is among the top leading causes of death among both rural and urban India. According to the latest National Cancer Registry Program, some of the highest incidence of cancer rates among men and women in the country were observed in Aizwal district in Mizoram and East Khasi district in Meghalaya.

The discussion covered various aspects of the disease, ranging from risk factors for cancer, cancer diagnosis, disease management, socio-cultural behaviour towards cancer and more. The eminent panel included, **Dr Preet Dhillon**, epidemiologist at the Public Health Foundation of India, New Delhi, who started the discussion by giving an overview of cancer incidence in India, with particular focus on Meghalaya and the North East. The other panellists included prominent clinicians and academics from Shillong, **Dr Judita Syiemlieh**, oncologist at Civil Hospital Shillong, **Prof (Dr) P Bhattacharya**, Head, Department of Anesthesiology and Intensive Care at NEIGRIHMS- Shillong, **Dr Caleb Harris**, Surgical Oncologist at NEIGRIHMS- Shillong and editor of Shillong Times, **Ms Patricia Mukhim**. After a brief welcome note by **Dr Sarah Iqbal**, Public Engagement officer, Wellcome Trust/DBT India Alliance, **Dr Sandra Albert**, Director, Indian Institute of Public Health, was invited to moderate the discussion.

At the outset, Dr Dhillon alluded to the recent data from the ICMR Cancer Registry program when talking about the 1.5 million cancer cases every year in India and acknowledged that even though the registry programs such as these focussed on small population pockets in the states they still provided the best picture of cancer incidence in the country. It was very clear from the data that the North East and particularly Meghalaya had highest incidence of cancer, and also the highest proportion of tobacco-related cancers in the country (male 69.5%, female 45%). The data from the National Cancer Registry Program also showed that highest rates of tongue cancer and hypopharynx cancer in the world are in Meghalaya. Dr Dhillon opined that at least 15 years of data is required to be able to suggest conclusively how cancer rates are changing and suggested investigations in North East should focus on the varieties of local tobacco and its consumption pattern, dietary habits, infections, genetic susceptibility, environmental exposure. In her address, leading cancer oncologist in Shillong, Dr Judita highlighted the need for building manpower in the health professions and promoting tobacco control more aggressively to tackle cancer effectively. Dr Caleb Harris, who recently moved to NEIGRIHMS, talked about the different cancer therapies. He informed the audience that at NEIGRIHMS, they have created a multidisciplinary team of cancer surgeons, radiologist, palliative care professionals, pathologist who discuss and decide the best possible treatment for different cancer cases that come to the hospital. Dr Bhattacharya, who was instrumental in starting the first palliative care centre in Meghalaya NEIGRIHMS, stressed on the importance of emotional support for cancer patients. He was of the opinion that failure to cure cancer does not equal complete failure of the treatment and cancer treatment should always be accompanied by palliative care for the patient. Editor of the Shillong Times, Ms Patricia Mukhim, encouraged the audience, specially the younger health professionals and scientists, to write more about health for popular media. She called for more comprehensible science writing related to cancer and other diseases to be made available to the media.

The event was attended by primarily young audience comprising of carers, doctors, academics, patients, students of social work, nursing, counselling & psychology and allied health, members of NGOs and the general public. The questions asked by the audience were on topics such as, information on cancer risk factors, cancer data collection methodologies, cancer screening and treatment, reasons behind high cancer rates in Khasi Hills and lack of seriousness about cancer prevention, effectiveness of cancer awareness programmes, family support for cancer patients, exposure to toxic radioactive substances and many others. Some serious issues were raised through this discussion concerning cancer awareness in the North East India, and tangible and useful solutions were offered by the panelists. IIPH Director, Dr Sandra Albert also announced that many such public programmes will be held in Shillong in the coming future. In addition to the discussion, informational material on cancer was available for the attendees. Members of the Palliative Care centre at NEIGRIHMS had set up a stall through which they shared information on the services provided by them. This event will hopefully act as a springboard for other public awareness programmes on cancer and other health issues in the North East.

About the organisers:

The **Wellcome Trust/DBT India Alliance** (www.wellcomedbt.org) a registered charitable trust in India, is a partnership between Wellcome Trust, UK (www.wellcome.ac.uk) and Department of Biotechnology, Government of India (www.dbt.nic.in), aimed at promoting biomedical, clinical and public health research in India through funding and engagement.

The **Public Health Foundation of India** (PHFI) is a public private initiative that aims strengthen India’s public health institutional and systems capability and provide knowledge to achieve better health outcomes for all. The **Indian Institute of Public Health Shillong**, which is one of the regional arms of PHFI, was established in 2015 to redress the limited institutional and systems capacity in public health in the northeast region of India.