

**FEATURE ADDRESS BY MINISTER OF HEALTH,
THE HONOURABLE, Dr. LACKRAM BODOE**

T&TMA 31st Annual Medical Research Conference

**Theme: “From Surviving to Thriving in the
Workplace”**

Radisson Hotel Ballroom

SUNDAY 29th JUNE, 2025

Time: 8:30 a.m.

Good morning.

It is truly an honour to stand before you today at the opening of the 31st Annual Medical Research Conference.

Let me first express my sincere gratitude to the Trinidad and Tobago Medical Association (T&TMA) for the kind invitation to deliver this address. This year’s theme, “**From Surviving to Thriving in the Workplace**,” is not only timely, it is necessary. The past few years have tested the very core of our healthcare system. We have endured crises and we have faced uncertainties. It reminds us that while we have endured extraordinary trials in recent years, marked by a global pandemic, social upheavals and a stretched healthcare system, we are now called to embrace transformation, growth and renewal. Today, we gather not just to reflect, but to act. To shift the conversation from simply enduring to truly excelling. From surviving to thriving.

This theme is closely tied to one of our country’s most urgent health

priorities, mental health. Mental health is the silent backbone of our overall well-being. Without it, no system, no matter how advanced, can function at its best. That is why it must remain a top priority.

When we invest in mental wellness, we are not only treating illness, we are empowering individuals, strengthening families and building more resilient communities. A healthy society is not just one free of disease, but one where every person feels supported, seen and valued.

The Ministry of Health continues to work diligently to embed mental wellness in all facets of our healthcare system. We are expanding community-based care, reinforcing the capacity of our Mental Health Unit and working with RHAs, NGOs, and advocates to eliminate stigma and improve access. As part of this government's commitment, mental health services are being integrated into all routine health services delivery systems. The government is also committed to increasing the number of trained staff at research units to support timely decision making in mental health care. But just as critical to this vision is the role of research and innovation.

Medical research is not just about innovation, it is about survival, dignity and sovereignty. For Trinidad and Tobago, investing in research means shaping our own health solutions based on the realities and needs of our people. It means anticipating risks and finding solutions based on what is happening around us globally. Research gives us the tools to address the unique health burdens we face, be it non-communicable diseases, emerging infections, mental illness, or occupational health challenges. It allows us to identify

patterns, test interventions, inform public health policies and continuously improve patient care.

For instance, the Ministry recently completed its STEPS Survey 2024 report, as well as the Cancer Report, which covers the period from 2003 to 2020. These reports provided the Ministry with data on key Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) risk factors.

In the case of cervical cancer, here are some data from the Dr. Elizabeth Quamina National Cancer Registry for Trinidad and Tobago:

- For the period 2017 – 2021, cervical cancer was the 4th most common form of cancer amongst women in TTO, accounting for 7.6% (649 new cases) of female cancers in this period. It was also the 4th most common cause (8.3%) of cancer deaths among women.
- The 2017-2021 data indicate that the majority of new cases occurred in women aged 40-44 years (12.3%), followed by 65-69 years (11.2%), 55-59 years (10.8%), and 45-49 years (10.3%).
- The majority of deaths occurred in women 65-69 years (12.2%), followed by 55-59 years (11.9%), 40-44 years (10.9%), and 60-64 years (10.6%)

These key findings will provide essential insight to guide public health policies, strengthen early detection efforts and enhance treatment strategies, all with the goal of improving the health and well-being of our citizens. Already, the data has positioned the Ministry to address the incidence of cancer by:

- Improved screening technologies;

- increased screening activities;
- increased awareness and promotion of the HPV vaccine; and
- strengthened partnerships between local institutions and global health organizations bring funding, expertise and technology to strengthen prevention strategies.

Indeed, early detection by screening all women in the target age group, followed by treatment of detected precancerous lesions, can prevent the majority of cervical cancers.

Furthermore, we are reinforcing our commitment to research by building systems that support data collection, protect patient privacy, and foster innovation. A key area of transformation is the advancement of our Electronic Health Record (EHR) system. The effective implementation and integration of EHRs are not just about digitising patient files, they are about improving care coordination, reducing medical errors and enhancing the efficiency and accuracy of clinical decisions. As we continue to invest in training, infrastructure and secure data architecture, we are laying the foundation for a smarter, more responsive healthcare system, one that empowers both providers and patients to make informed choices and contribute to a data-driven culture of continuous improvement.

That is why conferences like these are necessary. They offer a platform for knowledge exchange and collaboration, while encouraging the next generation of medical professionals to think critically, question assumptions and pursue innovation. To our young doctors, students, and researchers, you are not only the future of healthcare in this country, you are already shaping it.

As I close, let me express deep appreciation to the T&TMA for your leadership in making research a national priority. Your work inspires collaboration, sparks ideas and strengthens the foundation of our healthcare system.

Research drives progress and innovation is the heartbeat of modern healthcare. Our goal, indeed, is to anchor national health policy in evidence-based decision-making, to ensure that what we do works.

To all our healthcare workers, thank you. Your dedication, compassion, and resilience continue to shape a healthier Trinidad and Tobago.

Let us move forward together, supporting one another, cultivating healthier minds and building a healthcare system that not only survives adversity, but thrives because of it. Let us keep asking questions, keep seeking answers and keep pushing the boundaries of what is possible through research, through collaboration and through hope. Together, let us move from surviving to thriving.

Thank you and I wish you all a meaningful and impactful conference.