

**ADDRESS BY THE HONOURABLE DR. RISHAD SEECHERAN
MINISTER IN THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH**

HANSEN'S DISEASE CLINICAL TRAINING SEMINAR SERIES

**AMPHITHEATRE B, ERIC WILLIAMS MEDICAL SCIENCES
COMPLEX**

MONDAY 21ST JULY, 2025

It is truly a pleasure to be here today on behalf of the Minister of Health, the Honourable Dr. Lackram Bodoie, who unfortunately could not join us but has asked me to convey his warm greetings and appreciation at the occasion of this important seminar. This event has been made possible through our ongoing partnership with the Pan American Health Organization and the Trinidad and Tobago Medical Association. Together, we have taken another meaningful step in strengthening our health system and, more importantly, in improving the lives of our citizens particularly those affected by Hansen's disease.

Hansen's disease is a disease that is both ancient and, sadly, still misunderstood. While it is entirely curable, the disease continues to affect individuals physically, emotionally and socially, largely because of delayed detection and persistent stigma.

In Trinidad and Tobago, an average of eighteen cases are detected annually. This number could reflect either a genuinely low

incidence or, more concerning, under diagnosis and a reluctance among individuals to seek care. For this reason, your role as healthcare practitioners is so critical.

Early detection by doctors can mean the difference between a full recovery and lifelong disability. It can prevent transmission within families and communities and can spare patients the burden of stigma and discrimination that often accompany visible symptoms.

When you are equipped with the knowledge to recognise the early signs, you become a powerful agent of change. Therefore, it is our hope that this seminar will equip you with the knowledge to identify potential cases early and promptly refer them to the Hansen's Disease Control Unit for diagnosis and treatment.

With this being said, diagnosis and treatment are only part of the mission. Breaking the stigma requires just as much attention. The Ministry of Health recognises that leprosy is not just a health issue but also a social issue. Every patient deserves to be treated with respect and compassion, free from judgement or fear. You have the power to shape not only the clinical outcomes, but also the societal attitudes surrounding Hansen's disease.

Let me also take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) for their unwavering support in helping us strengthen technical capacity and expand access to healthcare services. Our collaboration with PAHO

has been longstanding and impactful, enhancing our ability to respond effectively across all levels of care, from primary healthcare clinics to national public health strategies.

In alignment with the World Health Organization (WHO)'s Global Leprosy Strategy and with PAHO's invaluable guidance, the Ministry of Health has introduced Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) for individuals who have been in close contact with patients diagnosed with Hansen's Disease. Under this initiative, eligible contacts are now offered Single Dose Rifampicin (SDR) following proper clinical evaluation.

Additionally, the Hansen's Disease Control Unit has launched a door-to-door case-finding campaign to actively identify individuals with the disease and initiate full treatment promptly. In parallel, SDR has also been administered to other community residents to significantly reduce their risk of developing the disease.

Thanks to PAHO's support in securing funding from WHO, the Ministry has also implemented targeted Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) activities. These efforts are focused on raising public awareness about the early signs of the disease and its continued presence in vulnerable communities.

To this end, these training sessions with our dedicated primary care physicians represent another critical step toward achieving the

WHO's ambitious yet attainable goal of 'Zero Hansen's Disease' by the year 2030.

In closing, I encourage each of you to take what you have learned and apply it in your daily work. Share it with your colleagues. Use it to advocate for your patients for knowledge, applied with empathy, is one of the most powerful tools we have.

Thank you for your commitment, and may you continue to serve with excellence and compassion.