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1 Latest news and trends

1.1 Vietnam health minister retires mid-term

Nguyen Thi Kim Tien retires mid-term as Vietnamese Minister of Health on November 22, 2019.

Nguyen Thi Kim Tien, Vietnam’s only female minister and only minister not a Party Central Committee member, retires Friday.

The legislative National Assembly made the official announcement of Tien’s retirement at its ongoing session in Hanoi.

With Tien reaching the retirement age of 60 and not being a committee member, she has to retire midway instead of continuing to work till the term ends in 2021. Her replacement has not been announced.

Tien, a native of the central province of Ha Tinh, was appointed Minister of Health in August 2011. She was member of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam between January 2011 and January 2016 but was not reelected in the 12th committee for the 2016-2021 term, making her the only minister without such position. During her time as health minister, Tien had assigned herself the task of reducing overload in hospitals. When taking the position, she’d said: “There is no place in the world I have visited, even South Africa, that patients have to lie underneath hospital beds as is happening in our country.”

In March 2012, she told legislators at a session that some major hospitals in Vietnam had three to four patients in one bed, and put forward a plan to build a second campus for Hanoi’s K hospital, one of the biggest in Vietnam and specializing in cancer treatment, as also for Cho Ray, a major hospital in Ho Chi Minh City that serves the entire southern region. One month after that session, her ministry submitted a master plan on easing hospital overload to the government. The plan, which targets eliminating the problem by 2020, was approved.
Some of her promises were realized. The second and third campuses of K Hospital were opened in 2012 and 2016. The bed occupation rate at the hospital decreased from 249 percent in 2012 to around 100 percent in the middle of this year. But the second campus for Cho Ray Hospital still remains on paper. The hospital receives around 5,500 patients and admits 2,700 a day. Seeing that the lack of doctors and facilities in remote and poor areas was a major reason for patients to flock to big hospitals in cities and towns, the ministry acted to address this problem.

In 2013, it developed the satellite hospital model in which district-level hospitals would receive training courses and support from city and national-level hospitals. Tien herself took young volunteer doctors to poor and remote districts and encouraged more to do the same. Thanks to this model, 19 satellite hospitals have been set up around 23 nucleus hospitals and by 2018, 56,500 hospital beds have been added nationwide. However, despite these efforts, overloading remains a problem at major hospitals across Vietnam. Tien used to tell the press that a lack of state funds to build new hospitals and equip existing ones with better tools had placed difficulties in dealing with the overload problem.

Four months ago, Tien was named the head of a department that takes care of the health of government officials.


1.2 Healthy Lung programme improves Asthma & COPD management in Vietnam

Prof. Ngô Quý Châu, President of Việt Nam Respiratory Society speaks at a workshop to review outcomes of the Healthy Lung programme after 12 months implementation in Việt Nam
HÀ NỘI — A programme on asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) management in Việt Nam has gained remarkable results in reducing the hospitalisation rate of patients in Hải Phòng.

The 3-year programme, entitled Healthy Lung programme, is implemented by the Ministry of Health’s Medical Service Administration (MSA) and AstraZeneca Việt Nam to improve the quality of outpatient management of asthma and COPD in nine countries in Asia, including Việt Nam since 2017.

After 12 months of implementation, the hospitalisation rate of asthma patients has reduced from 29.3 per cent to 6.2 per cent while the hospitalisation rate of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) patients also decreased from 51 per cent to 32 per cent at the Hải Phòng Tuberculosis & Lung Hospital.

The number of patients the programme helped to partly control asthma increased by 50 per cent, while there is an increase of 28.1 per cent in patients who can fully control the disease. Overall, the programme has delivered significant reductions in uncontrolled cases by 78.1 per cent.

The programme has addressed current gaps in asthma and COPD management by contributing to the creation of national guidelines for asthma and COPD management which has been applied in the Healthy Lung programme from 2017-20.

The programme established 65 centres of excellence, known as UMAC (Unit of Management for Asthma and COPD) nationwide. In addition, the programme helped to manage more than 89,000 patients with asthma and COPD, diagnosed 4,642 people at risk of the respiratory disease, and educated more than 11,325 patients through patient clubs about the management of asthma and COPD. It also provided continuous medical training for more than 1,410 healthcare professionals (HCPs), with 94 HCPs and nurses certified.

The outcome of the Healthy Lung programme has been introduced at of the 24th Congress of the Asian Pacific Society of Respirology (APSR 2019) that is taking place in Hà Nội from November 14 to 17.

“Healthy Lung with its UMAC model is a prime example of how respiratory disease management can be made available to the grass roots level in Việt Nam. As national taskforces continue to expand this model, it’s important to analyse the impact of the programme in terms of its clinical benefits and cost-effectiveness,” said Prof. Ngô Quý Châu, President of Việt Nam Respiratory Society, president of APSR 2019.


1.3 Vietnam expands national PrEP programme to 15 more localities

Vietnam will expand the national programme for Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV prevention to 15 more cities and provinces following the positive outcomes of the pilot implementation in 11 localities over the past one year.
Hanoi (VNA) – Vietnam will expand the national programme for Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV prevention to 15 more cities and provinces following the positive outcomes of the pilot implementation in 11 localities over the past one year.

The information was released at a workshop held in Ho Chi Minh City on November 27 by the Ministry of Health’s Vietnam Administration for HIV/AIDS Control (VAAC), the USAID/PATH Healthy Market and UNAIDS.

VAAC deputy head Phan Thi Thu Huong said more than 6,000 people have enrolled in the PrEP programme so far, including 3,946 joining in 2019.

She added that the Global Fund has committed non-refundable aid to support Vietnam’s response to HIV/AIDS among the MSM community in 2019-2020, which will enable greater access to and uptake of PrEP for those that are at highest risk of HIV.

According to USAID Vietnam Health Office Director Ritu Singh, even though PrEP use is increasing in Vietnam, many more people need to have access to it for there to be population-level impact in reducing HIV incidence.

She said USAIDS will assist the VAAC and implementing partners in further boosting demand creation and in ensuring that PrEP clients get the support they need to stay on PrEP.

PrEP was first piloted in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in 2016. The Ministry of Health made it part of the direction for HIV/AIDS care and treatment in 2017 and passed a plan to roll out the service for the 2018-2020 in 2018 with the provision of free antiretroviral drugs for HIV treatment.

Vietnam is the second country in Asia to launch PrEP service nationwide, after Thailand./.

1.4  Largest vaccination center opened in Mekong delta

The Ministry of Health (MoH) and the Vietnam Vaccine Corporation (VNVC) yesterday opened VNVC Can Tho Vaccination Center at 576 in 30/4 Street in Ninh Kieu District in the Mekong delta city of Can Tho.

Located over the area of 4,500 sq. meters with 30 checkup and vaccination rooms, the Center can serve around 1,200 customers a day, the largest of its kind in the Mekong delta.

In addition to providing normal vaccine, the Center also supplies Hexaxim, Rotavirus vaccine, latest seasonal influenza vaccines, SYNFLORIX and Prevenar 13.

Dr. Tran Dac Phu, former Head of the Preventative Medicine Department under the Ministry of Health, said three standardized aspects in VNVC include certified medical staffs, most of the facility’s vaccines with clear indication of origin.

Moreover, VNVC’s each vaccination center has special well-equipped room to treat children suffering serious vaccine reactions.

Mr. Tran Dac Phu said the National Expanded Immunization Program has provided only ten out of 30 vaccines available in Vietnam. Furthermore, vaccination facilities fail to meet residents’ demand because they are short of expensive vaccine; plus, medical institutions are in poor repair and prices of vaccinc are high.

1.5 Vietnam adopts latest technologies in cardiovascular surgery

The adoption of the latest advancements in cardiovascular surgery such as robot-assisted surgery and three-dimensional (3D) laparoscopic surgery has resulted in better treatment of cardiovascular diseases in Vietnam, leading cardiologists have said.

A patient with heart failure (left) at Cho Ray Hospital is in stable condition after undergoing heart transplantation surgery with a heart from a brain-dead donor. (Photo courtesy of the hospital)

HCM City (VNS/VNA) - The adoption of the latest advancements in cardiovascular surgery such as robot-assisted surgery and three-dimensional (3D) laparoscopic surgery has resulted in better treatment of cardiovascular diseases in Vietnam, leading cardiologists have said.

Le Ngoc Thanh, chairman of the Association of Cardiovascular and Thoracic Surgery, said that minimally invasive heart surgery represented a real revolution in treatment of heart diseases in Vietnam.

Minimally invasive heart surgery is used to treat a variety of heart conditions and results in fewer complications, quicker recovery, less pain, and shorter hospital stays, Thanh, director of Hospital E in Hanoi, said at a conference held at Cho Ray Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City last week.

Since 2013, more than 900 cases of minimally invasive heart surgery have been performed at the Hospital E.

A child weighing 13 kilogrammes was the youngest patient to undergo minimally invasive heart surgery at the hospital.

Recently, the hospital successfully performed 3D laparoscopic surgery, which helps reduce operative time and complications, according to Thanh.
“Heart transplantation from brain-dead donors is a breakthrough achievement of cardiac surgery in Vietnam,” he said.

Nguyen Thai An, head of Cho Ray Hospital’s department of cardiac surgery, said that heart failure was a huge burden on medical care, including lengthy hospital treatments and high medical costs.

Heart transplantation is one of the options for treating heart failure.

Since 2017, doctors at Cho Ray Hospital have successfully performed heart transplantation from brain-dead donors for four patients with heart failure in the advanced stage.

The heart transplantations were assisted by Hanoi’s Viet Duc Hospital. The four patients are in stable condition.

According to Deputy Minister of Health Nguyen Truong Son, Vietnam is among the countries with the highest heart disease-related deaths in the world.

Cardiovascular diseases are a leading cause of death globally, claiming 18 million lives a year, according to Son./.


2 Import-Export

2.1 Vietnam's pharmaceutical import up 11.3 pct in 10 months

Pharmaceutical companies are on the rise as they are the only companies that have been successful in the times when almost all the sectors are experiencing a major downfall in the profitability and have been affecting the company’s growth. Vietnamese pharmaceutical industry has been in the news for the past week, let’s see why is it getting the popularity that it is getting.

Vietnam has spent over 2.5 billion U.S. dollars importing evidence-based medicines in the first ten months of this year, and this has led to some serious head-turning in the global stage, and people are just concerned about what the nation of Vietnam is up to. The Vietnamese Ministry of Industry and Trade has given out these numbers and has also stated that the government has increased 11.3 percent from the same period last year. The pharmaceutical market of the nation has great potential and is expected to grow to huge numbers in the coming years due to the rise in individual spending on medicines and pharmaceutical products that have been rising a good amount in the past couple of years. Spending increased to 37.97 U.S. dollars in 2015 from 22.25 U.S. dollars in 2010, and this has been growing at a good rate, which is why the nation is expecting to grow to 80 dollars U.S. by 2020 and almost double to 163 by the year 2025.

This optimism is the reason why the nation has been in the news, and with most imports from non-United States companies, the government has cut down on significant spending.

3 Event

3.1 Vietnam Medipharm Expo 2019 to open in Hanoi next month

The 26th Vietnam International Medical, Hospital and Pharmaceutical Exhibition (Vietnam Medipharm Expo) will take place from December 5-7 in Hanoi, attracting 180 domestic and foreign exhibitors.

To be organised at the Hanoi International Exhibition Centre, the exhibition is expected to welcome around 10,000 visitors. — Photo courtesy of Vinexad

Hanoi (VNA) - The 26th Vietnam International Medical, Hospital and Pharmaceutical Exhibition (Vietnam Medipharm Expo) will take place from December 5-7 in Hanoi, attracting 180 domestic and foreign exhibitors.

Among firms participating are those from India, Poland, Belarus, the Republic of Korea, Indonesia, China and Japan, the US, Russia, Spain, Turkey and Ukraine, according to the event’s organising board – the Vietnam National Trade Fair and Advertising Co (Vinexad).

They will showcase pharmaceuticals, herbs, functional foods; food processing and packing machinery; hospital services and medical tourism; beauty care, aesthetics; dental products, ophthalmic products; medical equipment; laboratory equipment and chemicals at 220 booths, it said.

The company described the upcoming event as an opportunity for organisations and businesses to promote products, exchange experiences, seize investment opportunities, expand markets, and promote co-operation to improve efficiency in production and business.

A seminar on introducing and updating new policies and regulations in manufacturing and trading of pharmaceutical products and medical equipment in Vietnam will be held on the sidelines of the event.

Other activities such as a programme that will connect domestic and foreign businesses (Business matching); a special customer purchase programme (VIPS Buyer) and a business meeting between Vietnamese and Russian businesses will be also included./.

4 International cooperation

4.1 Korea, ASEAN to expand cooperation in pharmaceutical sector

Korea will strengthen cooperation with the member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in the pharmaceutical industry.

As part of such efforts, the government on Monday opened the “K-Pharma Academy” for a five-day run, organized by the Korea Health Industry Development Institute and co-sponsored by the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

K-Pharma Academy is a training program that invites pharmaceutical regulatory officials from strategic countries to Korea to promote the superiority of the Korean pharmaceutical industry and to form an international network.

Since its inception in 2013, the event has invited 107 officers from Latin America, China and Central Asia. With the opening of the 2019 ASEAN-Korea Special Summit and the first Korea-Mekong country Summit this year, the organizers invited pharmaceutical officials from three ASEAN countries -- Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Mekong countries include Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

The pharmaceutical market in the ASEAN region is about $25.9 billion, accounting for 2.2 percent of the global market. The regional market is also growing rapidly due to high demand and economic growth. Korean pharmaceutical companies are paying attention to export products and sign technological cooperation agreements with the region.

For example, Alteogen has established a joint venture in Malaysia for developing biosimilars, and other Korean companies have also been actively expanding their business in Thailand and Singapore.

According to organizing officials, the invitational training program will consist of three important contents.

"First, we introduce the healthcare system of Korea, including health insurance, to the visiting regulatory officials," the officials said. "The program provides an opportunity to enhance the understanding of Korea's excellent medical system and high-quality Korean medicines by providing tours to major pharmaceutical firms, such as Chong Kun Dang and Dong-A ST, known for their high-tech drug production and new drug development."

Second, to resolve the difficulties of local companies obtaining regulatory approval in ASEAN countries, the program will hold a "New Southern Pharmaceutical Bio Forum" on Wednesday at Imperial Palace Seoul, the officials added.

During the forum, representatives from participating countries will discuss the current status of their licensing systems and future policy directions. The conference will also provide local companies with one-on-one consultations with participating representatives to answer questions about national policies and market conditions directly.

Third and last, the government plans to discuss ways for cooperation between Korea and the participants' countries and expand the pharmaceutical industry exchange.

"We hope this training program, prepared after the Korea-ASEAN Special Summit, will expand the exchange and cooperation in the pharmaceuticals field between Korea and ASEAN countries," said Im Eul-ki, a deputy director at the Overseas Medical Business Support Division of the health and welfare ministry.
Korean companies interested in entering the ASEAN market are advised to attend the New Southern Pharmaceutical Bio Forum to obtain the latest information and build a network, Im added.


4.2 JW Pharmaceutical launches joint-stock company in Vietnam

JW Group Chairman Lee Kyung-ha (eighth from left) and other executives and employees launched Euvipharm Joint Stock Company in Long An Province, Vietnam, on Wednesday

JW Pharmaceutical said that it has formally launched Euvipharm Joint Stock Company in Vietnam as part of its strategy to target pharmerging markets. Pharmerging market refers to countries with emerging pharmaceutical markets that have high growth potential and low clinical development costs.

The company acquired a 100 percent share of the Vietnamese company in September and appointed Yang Kil-choon as its new CEO.

"While Korean companies acquired equity shares of Vietnamese pharmaceutical companies or built a plant in the country, this is the first time that a Korean company takes over the entire equity of a Vietnamese pharmaceutical company and operates it directly," JW Pharmaceutical said.

Euvipharm, founded in 2005, operates a pharmaceutical plant with modern production facilities. Valeant, Canada's largest pharmaceutical company, took it over in 2013.

The Vietnamese company's plant, which has a total floor area of 35,000 square meters, is the largest in Vietnam and received good manufacturing practice approval from the World Health Organization. The factory can produce 1.93 billion medicines annually.
JW Pharmaceutical plans to release about 50 medicines Euvipharm can produce immediately, including powder injections, tablets, capsules, and eye drops.

The company also plans to expand the production scale by supplementing facilities and changing product licenses, and reinforce the company's portfolio by transferring production and quality control technologies, including JW's differentiated formulation research capabilities, to Euvipharm.

Besides, it will apply for a pharmaceutical inspection co-operation scheme (PIC/S) certification, and conduct a contract manufacturing organization (CMO) business.

"We will spare no investment and support toward Euvipharm so that it can become a major pharmaceutical company that contributes to Vietnam's healthcare industry," JW Group Chairman Lee Kyung-ha said. "Based on it, we expect to achieve good results in other ASEAN and pharmerging markets."


### 4.3 Japanese group joins local partner to open drugstores in Vietnam

A Matsumoto Kiyoshi drugstore in Tokyo, Japan. Photo by Shutterstock/Terence Toh Chin Eng.

Matsumoto Kiyoshito will set up a joint venture with Lotus Food Group next February to operate its drugstores in Vietnam.

The joint venture, named Matsumoto Kiyoshi Vietnam JSC, will open a chain of drugstores (pharmaceutical drugs, cosmetics, toiletries) with the trademark "MatsuKyo" in Vietnam.

The Japanese drugstore giant has not disclosed the location and timing of a first store opening, Vietnam News Agency reported.
The joint venture will be capitalized at VND31.5 billion ($1.36 million), and will be 51 percent owned by Matsumoto Kiyoshi, 48.87 percent by Ho Chi Minh City-based Lotus Food Group, and 0.13 percent by Le Van May, president and CEO of Lotus Food, according to Matsumoto Kiyoshi’s recent statement.

Under the joint venture agreement, which Matsumoto Kiyoshi said is expected to be signed later this month, Lotus Food’s Le Van May will be chairman of Matsumoto Kiyoshi Vietnam, and the role of CEO will be filled by someone from the Tokyo-based firm.

The two sides had signed a basic agreement to this effect in July.

Matsumotokiyoshi has been pursuing its overseas expansion in recent years. It had 33 stores in Thailand and three in Taiwan as of the end of June, and plans to expand to Hong Kong.

"Vietnam is an emerging market, so there's plenty of room to open new stores," a spokesperson for the company told Nikkei Asian Review in July.

Vietnam is among 17 countries in the so-called "pharmerging" markets, a group of countries that are expected to be the pillars of the global pharma industry, according to U.S. information technology firm IMS Health. Its drug market is expected sustain a 10 percent annual growth for the next five years.

The industry grew 16 percent a year in 2015-2018, with sales currently topping $10 billion, according to a report by global research firm Business Monitor International.

The country still imports over half of its drug needs, especially patented drugs. In the first 10 months of this year its imports were worth $2.55 billion, up 111 percent year-on-year, the General Statistics Office reported.


4.4 Australia’s largest cancer care provider penned deal with Vietnam’s Vinmec International hospital

Australia’s largest cancer care provider, owned by a QIC-led consortium, just penned a deal with Vietnam’s Vinmec Central Park International Hospital.

Australia’s largest cancer care provider, Icon Group, has refinanced more than $800 million of debt to support its expansion into Asia to meet the growing cancer burden in the region.

Icon – which is owned by a consortium led by Queensland Investment Corporation – will use the funds to repay existing debt and will also part fund the acquisition of oncology-focused group SunTech Medical Group in Hong Kong.

The Brisbane-based company just days ago penned a new deal with Vinmec Central Park International Hospital in Vietnam. The service agreement will see Icon introduce specialised radiation technology and planning audit tools that respond to the individual treatment needs of patients.
Icon Group chief executive Mark Middleton said growing partnerships in China and Vietnam is the focus.

Icon chief executive Mark Middleton told The Australian Financial Review the company has a strong pipeline of future partnerships that will enable it to bring its cancer care expertise to Asia.

"This partnership is another step forward in our commitment to an elevated standard of cancer care in the region," he said.

"We are also providing remote services from Brisbane as well (under the deal with Vinmec), we have also signed an MOU with a government hospital to provide similar services."

Mr Middleton said access to cancer care in Vietnam was very limited, and with cancer incidences likely to increase by 30 per cent in the next decade, has called for substantial investment in cancer care delivery.

Similar to other south-east Asia countries, he said issues that locals have include gaining access to care, given the availability in the big metropolitan cities, people travelling long distances and long waiting lists.

Icon has shared care arrangements in other SEA nation's like the Philippines and Indonesia, but Mr Middleton said the focus was on China and Vietnam.

Source:https://www.afr.com/companies/healthcare-and-fitness/icon-refinances-800m-debt-20191106-p537u8
5 Digitalisation

5.1 MyDoc and BaoViet partner to expand digital healthcare access in Vietnam

Singapore-based digital healthcare platform MyDoc recently announced that it has signed an agreement with BaoViet Group Insurance, one of Vietnam’s largest listed insurance companies. According to MyDoc’s official press release, the partnership with BaoViet, which leads the industry with a 40% market share, is the first of its kind to offer a cashless digitally integrated clinic service to its health insurance policyholders nationwide.

The service will be rolled out in phases, with locally licensed doctors from clinical partner DHA clinic group and a major multi-chain pharmacy. Policyholders will be able to access free value-added digital concierge and healthcare services on their mobile phone, including doctor consultations and electronic prescriptions, in English and Vietnamese.

Beyond Vietnam, MyDoc is in the process of scaling up its operation in Hong Kong, Thailand, Philippines, and India where it has been running virtual and in-person clinics for employees at the head offices of its Temasek-backed investor UST Global.

THE LARGER TREND

There has been a recent trend of Singapore-based telehealth/digital health companies expanding their footprint into Vietnam. In September this year, Singapore-headquartered telehealth startup Doctor Anywhere signed a Strategic Cooperation Agreement with Bao Minh Insurance, another large Vietnamese insurance group. The agreement will bring a suite of online and offline healthcare
services, including doctor video consultation and medication delivery, an online health and wellness shopping marketplace, home-based healthcare services onto a single platform.

Doctor Anywhere also signed another agreement with ViettelPay, part of Vietnam’s largest mobile carrier Viettel, just last month. This will enable ViettelPay’s customers to directly connect to Doctor Anywhere’s virtual clinic and consult a locally registered doctor, as well as access a range of wellness services directly on the ViettelPay App.

MyDoc has partnered with insurance companies such as Prudential (earlier this year) and AIA (last year) to offer their respective clients an integrated manner to manage their health or screen their health for potential diseases, usually done through client-facing apps designed by the insurance companies.

ON THE RECORD

“We are simplifying the health insurance claims process and tackling the shortage of healthcare capacity by reducing hospital readmissions. Our integrated gateway model offers more than just faster access to best-in-class healthcare. Our clinical research teams can use millions of anonymised clinical data points studies over seven years to identify disease patterns and their treatments. We enable market-leading providers like BaoViet to get the right care at the right time and keep them out of hospitals,” said Dr. Snehal Patel, CEO and co-founder of MyDoc in a statement.

“We select best-in-class clinical partners carefully through a series of stringent standards and procedures. All clinical teams are required to complete clinical and product training and pass test consultations prior to certification. It’s only through putting our patients first, that we can deliver quality healthcare to 600 million people across Southeast Asia,” he added.


5.2 Digital literacy helps to reduce disparities in universal healthcare
Peter Chang, president of the Asian Health Literacy Association, speaks about global health literacy plans and governmental action at a conference on Monday in HCM City. — VNS Photo Gia Lộc

HCM CITY — Health literacy can contribute to reducing disparities among different groups of people in accessing universal healthcare services, Professor Dianne Levin-Zamir from Israel’s University of Haifa said on Monday (November 11) at an international conference held in HCM City.

In many countries, communication with patients and the public is increasingly becoming digital.

“This trend has great advantages, among them bringing health information and navigation directly into homes, allowing for personal data to be stored and then accessed for the benefit of the patient as well as increased efficiency. And it creates big data for analysis and technology development and more,” she said.

According to the World Health Organisation, health literacy reflects a certain level of knowledge, personal skills and confidence that allows individuals to take action and change their lifestyles and living conditions.

Digitalisation, however, requires the ability to seek, find, understand, and appraise health information from electronic sources and apply the knowledge to addressing or solving a health problem, she added.

Until recently, the phrase “digital divide” has been used to highlight the disparities that exist among the public regarding the use of mobile phones and the skills needed to manage health and healthcare in a digital world in which large groups are assumed to have been left behind, she noted.

An asset-based approach to understanding digital health literacy views digital tools as a means of empowerment for the patient and the public, she said.

Professor Kristine Sørensen from Global Health Literacy Academy in Denmark said that health literacy refers to how people access, understand, appraise and apply information technology to form judgments and make decisions regarding healthcare, disease prevention and health promotion.

Cancer literacy, for instance, is critically important for cancer patients who must make a complex set of diagnostic and treatment-based decisions at times of physical and emotional distress, she said.

Yet, it is unclear to what extent cancer literacy is reflected in cancer strategies such as the national cancer control plans, according to Sørensen.

Professor Paras K Pokharel of the School of Public Health & Community Medicine at the B P Koirala Institute of Health Sciences in Nepal, said: “With the changing dynamics of the public health problems that we face, these challenges demand coordinated actions.”

The UN’s sustainable development goals (SDGs) are interconnected and must be shared between every sector in society, he said.

As countries strive for universal health coverage, it is equally important to focus on social determinants of health, health policies and health literacy, Pokharel said.

“While we continue to discuss health policies and social determinants, there is a lack of discussion at the national level on the challenges of a health literacy approach to implement universal health care, about using health literacy to solve problems, and about the appropriate tools and strategies of health literacy, as well as the pertinent issues in which a health literacy approach can make an impact,” he said.
In such a backdrop, discussion is needed on how countries can remove barriers to health literacy and eventually leap forward to attain universal health coverage, he added.

A health-literate health-care organisation includes leadership engagement, workforce preparation, a shame-free environment, plain language writing and design principles, clear oral communications and checks on understanding involving the populations served, and the need for health literacy in high risk situations, according to experts at the conference.

The conference was held by Thủ Đức District Hospital in co-operation with the Asian Health Literacy Association. — VNS

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