



*Spencer*

**PRIME MINISTER**

22 September 1997

**TRANSCRIPT OF THE PRIME MINISTER  
THE HON. JOHN HOWARD MP  
WELCOME ADDRESS AT THE OPENING SESSION OF THE  
FORTY-EIGHTH SESSION OF THE WORLD HEALTH  
ORGANISATION'S REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE  
WESTERN PACIFIC - DARLING HARBOUR**

E&OE.....

Thank you very much Dr Andrew Podger, to my colleague Dr Michael Wooldridge, the Minister for Health and Family Services in Australia, to the Director General of the World Health Organisation, Dr Nakajima, to the Regional Director, Dr Han, to Mrs Jacobsen the Health Minister of the Republic of Niue, to other distinguished guests and particularly our overseas visitors, ladies and gentlemen.

It's a special privilege for me as Prime Minister to welcome you and to speak at the first-ever regional gathering of the World Health Organisation held in Australia. The World Health Organisation was formed almost fifty years ago and Australia was one of the original 61 countries that banded together to form an organisation during which 50 years of its existence, has delivered outcomes and pioneered improvements in the health and the lifestyles of the billions of people of the world in a way that I think has exceeded the expectations of its founders.

There is often debate about the worth of some international organisations. But in all the time that I have been interested in politics, and that goes back beyond the time when I entered Federal Parliament 23 years ago, I have never heard any serious criticism voiced about the role of the World Health Organisation. It has always been seen as a practical humanitarian body dedicated to the relief of human suffering and dedicated to finding solutions to disease and the spread of misery which disease inevitably involves.

Its founding ideal was to eradicate disease and conquer suffering by governments fostering co-operation among themselves and with others to promote the health of all people. We all know of the great work of the World

Health Organisation and others in the eradication of smallpox. But perhaps not so well known have been the efforts which have saved millions of children's lives through world-wide vaccination coverage, and successful campaigns against polio and leprosy have also been immense successes. And on the score of polio, it is my understanding that the world is close to be able to say that polio has been all but eliminated, and as someone who still remembers the times of the 1950s when polio was a constant challenge to the well-being and the happiness of families, not only in Australia but around the world, that is a truly remarkable achievement.

Of course when gatherings such as this occur the focus is inevitably on the future and on the challenges which the future carries with it. And as we can reflect upon the achievements of the past we must also acknowledge that there are new challenges. The spread of HIV/AIDS for example, represents the modern pandemic challenge which faces an organisation such as the World Health Organisation. I can say as Prime Minister of Australia, this country has been especially successful in relation to the challenge of the HIV/AIDS problem here in Australia. Through programmes that were instituted early on in the mid-1980s which drew strong bipartisan co-operation, we have achieved an enormous amount, and it is a demonstration of what can be done in relation to health challenges if the right resources, the right strategies and the right policies are achieved.

On a domestic level, my government recognises that care for the health of its citizens is amongst its prime responsibilities. And in one particular area we have focused very heavily on the challenge of falling immunisation rates. It may astonish many visitors to this country to be told that we found last year that on 53 per cent of Australian children were properly immunised against the preventable diseases of measles, whooping cough and German measles. And that revelation to us caused very great alarm and as a result the Federal Government took the lead in February of this year to adopt a major new initiative designed to reach out to 97 per cent of Australian parents who are in favour of immunisation but who do not finish the full vaccination regime.

And I want to take the opportunity here today of publicly paying tribute to my colleague, Dr Wooldridge, for the persistent lead and advocacy that he took in relation to immunisation, stretching back to the time when he was spokesman on health matters during our period in opposition. He is a practical example of helping all the citizens of a nation to respond in an immediate and pragmatic way to a serious challenge. And I certainly regarded it as a national disgrace that a country such as Australia should have such an appalling immunisation level, and that is why we've directed policies and resources in that direction.

I think Australia could also claim to have been relatively very successful in reducing the consumption and the use of tobacco. Since the 1980s the rates of adult Australians who have tried smoking have declined from 82 per cent to

67 per cent, and from young people from 73 per cent to fifty per cent. I don't pretend that we still don't have a long way to go, nor do I ignore for a moment the fact that we have challenges in other areas of substance abuse that most also be addressed, and perhaps if addressed with the same vigour, the same publicity and the same allocation of resources as directed to areas that I've mentioned this morning, and where we have been remarkably successful - then perhaps we might in a few years' time be able to speak with pride of the achievements in areas such as that.

I'm also very proud of the fact that my government has made improving the health of indigenous Australians a major priority. As a starting point we have reached an agreement with the states of Australia to provide a set of national performance indicators aimed at improving indigenous health. And the targets we've set ourselves include: a 20 per cent reduction over ten years in both the overall death rate and the rate in comparison with the death rate of other Australians; to reduce stillbirths by 50 per cent with ten years; to reduce mortality from pneumonia by 50 per cent within ten years; to reduce mortality from diabetes by 20 per cent within ten years; and to reduce mortality from cervical cancer by 50 per cent within ten years; and to achieve at least an 85 per cent coverage in child immunisation rates within three years.

These are practical, necessary and achievable targets, and we will be very closely working with the state governments of Australia to ensure that this very important contribution to improving the life expectancy, to improving the well-being and improving the general health of indigenous Australians is achieved. We owe them that and much more, and it's a very important, indeed solemn, obligation of my government to see that those health goals are achieved in the area of indigenous health.

The gathering here today of course has a very particular regional focus. And I am delighted to say again on behalf of the Australian Government that the focus of so many of our policies, be it in the economic area, be it in the area of diplomatic endeavour, be it in the area of institutional co-operation, and here today in the area of health, we place an enormous priority on our association with our regional neighbours.

We have much in common. We have a future destiny together as a group of nations in this part of the world. And working together to make common cause to eradicate the scourge of disease, to provide new hope and new opportunity to the people of this region - particularly those who are grappling with health challenges which would be beyond the belief and the comprehension of almost all people who live in Australia, which must still be numbered amongst one of the most fortunate in the world so far as its general state of health is concerned - the quality of its healthcare system, the excellence of its medical practitioners and the quality of the care and professional attention that is received by Australians in both public and private hospitals in this country.

And I take the opportunity of saying at this gathering that despite inevitable debate and criticism and argument about health-care issues, which is part and parcel of a lively democratic society, in comparative terms, the quality of health-care in this country and the dedicated service and professionalism of doctors and other health professionals is something of which Australians can be immensely proud.

But expressing our pride in that achievement doesn't lighten the burden of ensuring that improvements be made where they ought to be made. Nor particularly does it in any way reduce, rather it increase, the obligation that we owe to those who are not so fortunate. And there are many in the region whose health outcomes are far inferior to ours, not through want of effort and commitment, but simply through a combination of natural and other phenomena.

And this gathering here will remind Australia and those Australians participating, of our obligations to the region. It will remind us of the contribution that we can continue to make to the alleviation of human suffering. It will remind us of the enormous achievements of the past and it will also remind us of the challenges that lie ahead, remind us that diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis, which ten or 20 years ago we thought had been finally put behind us, are now re-emerging as significant health challenges in different parts of the world. So as always it remains a mixed story, but we record immense triumphs and immense successes. We rediscover old challenges and old threats in a new and more modern environment.

So ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Australia Government and on behalf of the Australian people, I welcome you very warmly to Australia and to the city of Sydney. I regard Australia's membership of the World Health Organisation as one of those enduring associations which have contributed to the relief of the suffering and the disability of mankind over a period of 50 years. And I know that I speak on behalf of both sides of politics and I know I speak on behalf of all the Australian people, in saying that we will continue to have a very deep and close involvement in the activities of the World Health Organisation. Australia will always be ready to play her part in helping to tackle the challenge of disease, will always be understanding of the problems of other nations, and will always be ready and willing to contribute our fair share in fighting disease and providing for a healthier, happier and more optimistic world for the future of its people.

Thank you.

(Ends)