**Premier and Minister for Health**

**Hon. Alden McLaughlin, MBE, JP, MLA**

**Caribbean Wellness Day Message 2016**

10 September 2016

As we mark the annual Caribbean Wellness Day on Saturday (10 September 2016), we focus our attention on the important matter of non-communicable diseases.

In the Cayman Islands, as in the rest of the Caribbean, non-communicable diseases are a heavy burden on our society and it is important that we do all that we can to raise awareness of these health issues.

Non-communicable diseases include diabetes, hypertension and obesity, which are all prevalent in these islands. The good news is, they are preventable and are largely dependent on the conscious nutritional and physical activity choices we make.

As a government, it serves us well to educate our people and encourage residents to adopt good health practices. Such steps help to ease the burden these diseases place on us all, both physically and in terms of cost.

Caribbean Wellness Day, which began in 2008, is organised by the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) and borne out of the Port-of-Spain Declaration (2007), which addresses non-communicable disease risk factors amongst the Caribbean population, particularly young people.

Such diseases are the leading cause of mortality and morbidity amongst our adult population in the Caribbean, but it is during the early years of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood that the conditions for non-communicable diseases can either be fostered or prevented.

It is fitting therefore that this year’s theme for Caribbean Wellness Day is “*Love that Body – Healthy Children in Healthy Environments”.*

I am particularly pleased that we are focusing on our younger generation as this potentially has life-long implications for improving the health of our children and therefore our future adult population.

Statistics from the Cayman Islands Health Services Authority, based on an annual screening of children entering our schools (age 4 to 5 years) show some worrying numbers.

The survey in 2015 revealed that 16 per cent of our children from that age group were obese (males, 11 per cent, and females, five per cent). An additional 21 per cent were at risk of becoming overweight (males, 10 per cent and females, 11 per cent).

Although there is no population-based risk factor data for adults in the Cayman Islands, the data from the school population indicates that there are high levels of childhood obesity. Such risk factors are a predictor for the future development of chronic non-communicable diseases in the Cayman Islands.

For this reason, I am pleased to note that we already have a proactive approach to wellness in our schools. Public Health continues to work with the Child Health Task Force, a private-public partnership to help schools develop and implement comprehensive health and wellness policies. The objective of this project is to create a supporting environment for health and wellness in the school setting, resulting in ripple effects outwards to the home and community at large.

In line with observing Caribbean Wellness Day this Saturday, we have a number of child health-related events during the next couple of weeks.

Various activities include educational and karate sessions in primary schools, a stamina competition for school-aged children, and a poster display on 18 September depicting the theme “Love that Body - Kids!” at participating churches across the islands. Children will be given information on ways to take care of their bodies and the various services offered to them at the Cayman Islands Hospital.

Additionally, there will be free health screenings including height, weight, and waist measurements as well as blood pressure readings, and a healthy lifestyle display, at the Special Olympics Healthy Athletes’ Day and Family Forum Saturday on 1 October.

I urge everyone, young and old, to take their health seriously and to develop a healthy lifestyle to avoid non-communicable diseases, many of which, I emphasise, can be prevented by adopting a nutritious, balanced diet and including regular exercise as part of our daily routine.

Let us take the opportunity on Saturday 10 September, Caribbean Wellness Day, to make a conscious effort to improve our health and to help improve the lives of our children.

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