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**REMARKS BY DR. JULIO FRENK UPON RECEIVING THE
ABRAHAM HORWITZ AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN LEADERSHIP
IN INTER-AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH**

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I am thrilled to have received the prestigious Abraham Horwitz Award, which honors the legacy of one of the most important public health figures in the Americas. I thank the jury for this unexpected distinction. More than a recognition of my own career, this award is a tribute to the work, achievements, and influence of the Mexican public health sector in recent decades.

I find it especially meaningful that it is from an institution that I have been associated with practically all my life—and I am not exaggerating:

The first time I visited the Pan American Health Organization was in the late 1960s, when I was 15 years old. My father had been invited to a meeting of experts on child malnutrition and brought me with him.

I returned eight years later during my final year in medical school. I was doing research on rotating internships in Mexico and came to PAHO to learn the views of two well-known experts in medical education: Juan César García and José Roberto Ferreira.

Some months later, thanks to a fellowship from this generous Organization, I began studying public health at the University of Michigan.

After completing my graduate studies, I returned to Mexico, where I had the good fortune to meet the already legendary Dr. Abraham Horwitz and work closely with him. Dr. Horwitz and José Roberto Ferreira were conducting an evaluation of Mexico's School of Public Health—the oldest in Latin America. Their valuable report provided key input for this school to become part of an institution I had the privilege of founding and heading: the National Institute of Public Health, created in 1987.

During my term from 2000 to 2006 as Mexico's Secretary of Health, I worked closely with PAHO. I regularly attended Directing Council meetings, and was privileged to take part in the Organization's 100th anniversary celebrations.

As you can see, I am joined to this institution by bonds of gratitude, affection, and respect that are being renewed today and would therefore like to reflect on the importance of PAHO's leadership in a world seeking to guarantee the universal, effective, and equitable exercise of the right to health protection.

Almost every country in the Americas is working toward universal health coverage: this is a wave rolling across the entire Hemisphere and around the world.

Our obligation is to carefully evaluate this rich explosion of innovative experiences so that we can be in a position to adopt and adapt their best practices. Each innovation is a learning opportunity: failure to take advantage of these opportunities will condemn us to rediscovering, at enormous cost, knowledge that already exists, or worse still, to repeating the errors of the past. This is why I like to say that in order to **reform** things, you must become **informed** so as not to **deform** them.

Fortunately, the Region of the Americas has been home to innovations that have fueled both international debate and national policy design. The Canadian health care system has been admired for several decades. Costa Rica, Cuba, and several Caribbean nations offer very useful lessons on how to achieve high levels of health at relatively low cost. More recently, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico have launched reforms that are extending access to comprehensive health services to almost the entire population. Tomorrow, the United States will begin one of the greatest experiments in the expansion of health coverage that the world has ever seen—whose implementation we should follow closely.

The most recent generation of reforms has been inspired by a profound paradigm shift: we no longer view access to health care as an employment benefit—which is necessarily limited—but rather, as a universal human right. Another major shift is that we have gone from limited reforms to comprehensive transformations of the health system, based on a spectrum of interventions ranging from the determinants of disease to its financial impact.

This overarching vision of a guaranteed universal right is best reflected in the concept of **social protection in health**, which has three dimensions: **(i) protection against health risks**, which is guaranteed through epidemiological surveillance and control, health promotion, prevention programs, and health regulations; **(ii) protection of the quality of services**, which includes the certification of providers, the accreditation of health facilities, and the implementation of ongoing improvement strategies; **(iii) financial protection** against the economic impact of disease and its treatment, which is guaranteed through financing mechanisms designed to prevent catastrophic expenditures.

PAHO has a key role to play in this movement toward comprehensive reform, as the Organization's new director has emphasized. PAHO has many advantages: the prestige it has earned through achievements dating as far back as the early decades of the 20th century; its close contacts with the Region's ministries of health; its ties with

other multilateral agencies; its interactions with civil society organizations working in the field of health; and its access to academic centers of excellence that generate knowledge contributing to the design, implementation, and evaluation of public policies.

Universal health coverage is not a passing fad: it is an imperative. Only by strengthening health systems and expanding social protection in health can we tackle the triple burden of disease affecting our countries: first, the unfinished agenda of common infections, maternal mortality, and malnutrition; second, the emerging challenges posed by noncommunicable diseases and their risk factors, as well as accidents and violence; and third, the risks directly associated with globalization, including pandemics and the impact of climate change on health.

Let me conclude by pointing out that universal access to high-quality health services with financial protection is a desirable goal in and of itself, but it is also a way to make the Americas a fairer, more stable, and more prosperous region.

Thank you once again for the honor that you have bestowed on me with the Abraham Horwitz Award and for allowing me, on behalf of all the award-winners, to speak to this distinguished audience. Thank you very much.