

Immunization "is a key step toward overcoming poverty"

The Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) was formally launched in late January at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. A new partnership of public and private sector bodies, GAVI aims to increase children's access to vaccines in developing countries. The choice of the Economic Forum, a high-level summit for business and political leaders, was deliberate: GAVI insists that immunization is not only a human right, but also a key step towards economic development.

Tore Godal, Executive Secretary of GAVI, expanded on this theme some weeks before the launch, in a lecture at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Godal chose an audacious title: Immunization against Poverty. He presented some of the mounting evidence that improved health has contributed significantly to economic development, both at population level and within households, during the twentieth century. "Diseases and their underlying causes can affect families in a number of ways," he said. They included reduction in productivity, impediment of education or retained high dependencies on family members. This could lead to adverse effects on the economies of families. "The emerging conclusion is that the right investment in health is at least as important as education."

Many of the conditions that kill children in developing countries are avoidable with simple and cost-effective interventions. In quantitative terms, vaccines represent the intervention with the largest potential impact. The vaccines that make up the traditional "cluster" given by the WHO Expanded Programme on Immunization can be delivered for just US\$ 25 per year of healthy life gained. Any intervention that buys a year of life for less than the average per-capita gross domestic product of the country is regarded by the World Bank as cost-effective. Therefore, there is a compelling case for countries with limited resources to focus on immunization, said Godal.

Now, given the availability of newer vaccines and a shift in resources towards primary health care, a rare opportunity exists to bring immunization to more children, said Godal. Despite the success of child

immunization programmes through the 1980s and 1990s, coverage rates in many countries are stagnating and in some countries, notably in sub-Saharan Africa, they are falling. Researchers calculate that more than 2 million lives could be saved each year if existing vaccines, such as those against hepatitis B and *Haemophilus influenzae* b (Hib) were available to all children. Recent analyses show that these vaccines, although more expensive than the traditional cluster, are still highly cost-effective. Further vaccines that are expected to be licensed soon, such as a vaccine against pneumococcal pneumonia, could save many additional lives.

Before Christmas, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation announced a donation of US\$ 750 million over five years to the Global Fund for Children's Vaccines, a new initiative linked closely with GAVI. However, significant further funds will be necessary to ensure a long-term programme.

The World Health Organization is one of several partners in GAVI. Other partners include the World Bank, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Bill and Melinda Gates Children's Vaccine Program, the Rockefeller Foundation, the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers' Associations (IFPMA) and some national governments. ■

Potential new drug treatment for osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a global health problem that will take on increasing significance as people live longer and the world's population continues to increase. Current treatments have been restricted by a lack of drugs capable of restoring bone mass to normal levels. This situation may be about to change with the discovery of beneficial bone-restoration effects of statins.

Greg Mundy and colleagues in the USA have reported that statins, compounds currently in use to lower blood cholesterol levels, induced significant bone growth in mouse bone cell cultures and also in rats and mice *in vivo*.^a If similar effects were observed in humans, statins would offer an

^a Mundy et al. Stimulation of bone formation *in vitro* and in rodents by statins. *Science*, 1999, **286**: 1946–1949.

effective treatment for those suffering from osteoporosis.

Mundy and co-workers screened 30 000 compounds in an attempt to find potential drug candidates with favourable effects on bone mass. Using a luciferase reporter-gene assay, the researchers looked for compounds that would activate the promoter of the bone morphogenetic protein-2 (*BMP-2*) gene. Lovastatin was observed in the initial screening to increase luciferase activity in the *in vitro* assay. When injected subcutaneously into tissue overlying the murine calvaria in live rats, a 50% increase in new bone formation was observed after five days of treatment.

To optimize potential treatments, the challenge will be to identify or synthesize related compounds that distribute themselves preferentially to bone or bone marrow. Pierre Delmas, President of the International Osteoporosis Foundation, told the *Bulletin*: "Statins are potentially good drugs for the treatment of osteoporosis. They appear to stimulate bone formation without increasing bone resorption. However, the currently marketed statins are unlikely to be used for the treatment of osteoporosis as they are not specific enough to target bone. It's the new statins, currently in development, that are more bone-specific and which offer the greatest promise." The work by Mundy and colleagues offers a step in this direction and may permit identification of compounds that may one day lead to effective oral treatments for osteoporosis. ■

Health by the people: a colloquium to celebrate the life of Ken Newell

Professor Ken Newell influenced many people during his life. In March 2000, it will be ten years since he died. This seems an appropriate moment to reflect on his life, celebrate what he achieved, and to explore his continuing influence on international health.

Always an innovator, Ken Newell influenced the direction of thinking in international health in recent decades. He was a driving force behind the concept of primary health care and bravely challenged fashionable views whilst subjecting traditional theories to critical analysis.

Ken Newell worked at WHO headquarters in Geneva for ten years, founding the Division of Research in Epidemiology and Communications Science, and acting as Director of the Division for Strengthening of Health Services from 1971 to 1977.

After spending time in his native New Zealand, he joined the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine as Professor of Tropical Community Health. To recognize his contribution to international health, the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine will hold an international colloquium that will:

- highlight the key themes of his work, their continuing influence and relevance;
- look to the future by exploring and challenging old and new dogmas.

The colloquium will take place in Liverpool on 23–24 March 2000 and will be based around key themes in Newell's landmark publication *Health by the people*.^b The themes of the colloquium are as follows.

- Equity
- Community voices
- Epidemiology for public health action
- Future challenges for community health.

For each theme, there will be contributions of both a personal and academic nature from a range of international speakers reflecting the breadth of his vision and how these ideas have developed. The contributions and discussions will be published after the meeting for a wider audience.

If you would like to attend the colloquium, or require further information, please contact Ms Philomena Hinds, International Health Division, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, Pembroke Place, Liverpool, L3 5QA, England (tel: +44 151 708 9393 ext. 2224; fax: +44 151 707 1702; e-mail: hinds@liverpool.ac.uk). ■

Inaugural conference of the International Society for Equity in Health, La Havana, Cuba, 29–30 June 2000

The International Society for Equity in Health (ISEqH) plans to hold its inaugural meeting in La Havana, Cuba, on 29–30 June 2000. ISEqH is a scientific society intended to encourage advances in knowledge about the importance of equity in the improvement

of the health of all people, and to promote the application of knowledge to activities directed at this goal. The purposes of ISEqH are as follows:

- to promote equity in health and health services internationally;
- to facilitate scientific exchange of conceptual and methodological knowledge on issues related to equity in health and health services;
- to advance research related to equity in health;
- to maintain corresponding relationships with other relevant international and regional organizations;
- to foster leadership and networking for equity in health.

The themes for the conference include:

- pathways through which the determinants of health operate;
- evaluation of interventions to promote equity;
- methods to explore the best ways of measuring the determinants of inequity in health and to establish the most useful statistical techniques for documenting the ways in which they act;
- policy and collaborative efforts;
- populations at risk (minorities, children and adolescents, women, including those who are pregnant);
- forum (discussion and criticism of recently published research).

To receive more information about the conference and the call for abstracts, please contact Dr Barbara Starfield (bstarfie@jhsph.edu) or Dr José María Paganini (isequity@netverk.com.ar). Correspondence should be addressed to Dr Paganini at the following address: International Society for Equity in Health, Facultad de Ciencias Médicas, 1er. Piso Edificio de la Biblioteca Calle 60 y 120, 1900 La Plata, Argentina (tel and fax: +54 221 423 5755). Further information about ISEqH is available at the following URL: <http://www.iseqh.org> ■

^b Newell KW. *Health by the people*. Geneva, World Health Organization, 1975.