

On the age issue, the Board decided to let the forthcoming May meeting of the World Health Assembly decide. By then a WHO-mandated literature review on the topic will have been completed and a group of experts will have met to discuss the review's findings.

Ranking of health systems

Last year's *World Health Report* erupted onto the international health scene with a ground-breaking table ranking the 191 member states of the organization according to how their health systems were performing. As WHO Director-General Gro Harlem Brundtland admitted in her opening statement to the Board, this exercise provoked not only "considerable public interest" but also "significant debate ... including critical remarks". Some countries were unhappy with the methodology or the data used. Others felt they should have been more involved in the process. Yet others questioned the usefulness of the table. Responding to these criticisms, Dr Brundtland said that the next ranking of health systems — scheduled for 2002, and every two years thereafter — would be based on a broad consultative process conducted at national, regional and global levels. The Board expressed satisfaction at Dr Brundtland's response and called for continuation of the health system assessments.

Outbreak surveillance and response

WHO is stepping up its outbreak surveillance and response capability. It is taking a leading role in a powerful new "network of networks" that scans the Internet for rumours of outbreaks, investigates suspected cases and verifies outbreaks of international concern. WHO announces confirmed outbreaks on its web site (<http://www.who.int/cha/disasters/>), together with advice on any travel or trade restrictions. A long-standing problem has been the reluctance of some countries to acknowledge outbreaks and thereby risk a negative impact on tourism and trade. The new procedures being put in place, which are implemented in close collaboration with the affected country, are contributing to prompt notification of outbreaks, mobilization of international assistance and rapid containment of epidemics.

The Board called on the Director-General to provide support to countries to bolster "their capacity to detect and respond rapidly to communicable disease threats and emergencies". ■

John Maurice, *Bulletin*, with reporting by Mary Kay Kindhauser, *WHO*

In Brief

WHO opens new office in France

On 8 February, WHO announced the opening in Lyon, a French city 150 km from the organization's Geneva headquarters, of an office that will coordinate activities aimed at bolstering the capability of developing countries to tackle epidemics, emerging diseases and drug resistance. The office, which will be part of WHO's communicable disease, surveillance and response department, will help train specialists from all over the world in epidemic control techniques. ■

Diary

Healthy water for all



WHO

"Water and health" is the theme of World Water Day 2001, which falls this year on 22 March. The theme also explains why this year WHO is the event's lead agency, among a large congregation of UN or UN-related bodies with an interest in water. The day will be marked by activities around the world aimed at reminding people of the vital link between safe water and health. Visit www.worldwaterday.org for further information. ■