

Water and health, hand-in-hand for a day



Picture: WHO

Collecting water is usually a woman's job.

To raise awareness of the connection between water and health, WHO was chosen as lead agency for World Water Day on 22 March. Scores of events, ranging from Internet-based discussions among students to ice-hockey games, music video releases, and the more traditional seminars and awards, took place in countries around the world. World Water Day has been celebrated annually since it was first conceived at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. This is the first year that WHO has acted as primary sponsor.

"Access to safe water is a universal need ... and a basic human right," WHO director-general, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, said in a video released on the World Water Day web site (www.worldwaterday.org). More than one billion people — 18% of the world's population — do not have access to "improved sources" of water and 2.4 billion do not have access to basic sanitation, she noted. Consequently, more than 3 million people die each year from water-related diseases such as diarrhoea and malaria. Millions of others suffer from diseases such as dysentery, which can be transmitted by contaminated water, and trachoma, which

is associated with lack of readily accessible water.

A lack of clean water is often linked to poverty. "The absence of a safe water supply contributes to an estimated 80% of disease and death in the developing world," said UN secretary-general Kofi Annan. "Clean water is a luxury that remains out of the reach of many."

A WHO report, *Water for Health — Taking Charge*, released on World Water Day, recommends several low-tech methods for improving water supplies and health in developing countries. "Business as usual is no longer an option," Brundtland wrote in the report's foreword. "We don't have enough time to just wait for large infrastructure investments to provide these basic services. Several simple interventions are available."

The report recommends chlorination, both in communities and for individual households. In one island country, Maldives, where chlorination was used in wells and rainwater collection tanks, deaths from diarrhoea were eliminated, according to the report. Another recommendation is for use of solar water disinfection, or SODIS, whereby water in plastic bottles is disinfected by exposure to the sun for at least 2 hours. A third recommendation is a change in behaviour. Handwashing with soap, for example, can dramatically lower rates of disease. ■

Catherine Dold, *Boulder, Colorado, USA*

A day in the life of the world's anti-TB drive

In March, WHO and the Stop TB partnership launched a US\$ 50 million-a-year initiative to provide free drugs to 10 million tuberculosis patients over the next five years. By 2010, the Global TB Drug Facility, as the initiative is called, aims to reach 45 million patients in the worst-affected countries. By 2020, it hopes to have prevented 25 million TB deaths and 50 million cases.

The new drug facility was launched in the run-up to World TB Day, 24 March, which this year focused on tuberculosis as a human rights issue. In announcing the new facility, WHO director-general Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland said access to treatment

and cure was basic to human rights. "It is shameful that TB patients are still dying of the disease, and inexcusable that less than a quarter of them have access to effective treatment."

In its annual report on global tuberculosis control, also issued in the run-up to World TB Day, WHO estimates that 8.4 million people contracted TB in 1999 — up from 8 million in 1997. The biggest increase in cases since 1997 was in sub-Saharan Africa, which experienced a 20% surge in cases due to the high rates of people co-infected with HIV and TB. About two

A sampling of World TB Day events

This year's World TB Day falls on 24 March. It was marked by a series of national and international events coordinated by the partners of the Stop TB partnership.

- 16 March, Cape Town, South Africa: Archbishop Desmond Tutu launches World TB Day with the publication of a new report by the Stop TB partnership: *A human rights approach to tuberculosis*.
- 20 March, New York, USA: the medical relief agency Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) holds a panel discussion, chaired by Pulitzer prize-winning author Laurie Garrett, on *Defusing the time bomb: the world's TB crisis*.
- 21 March, Washington DC, USA: the [US] National Council for the Elimination of TB and the Stop TB partnership launch the Global TB Drug Facility (see main text) and outline plans to introduce a new bill in the US Congress — the Omnibus Tuberculosis Control Bill 2001 — designed to boost US funding for national and global TB control activities.
- 23 March, Brussels, Belgium: the Global Alliance for TB Drug Development releases early research findings from a new study — *The pharmaco-economics of TB drug development* — which demonstrate the large market potential for a new TB drug that could reduce the treatment period from six to two months.
- 23 March, Moscow, Russian Federation: MSF holds a *Contagious concert*, in which young musicians perform works by composers who suffered from tuberculosis — including Chopin, Liszt, Shostakovich, and Stravinsky.