

Cardiovascular disease can be halved, World Health Report finds

Simple measures could halve the death and disability caused by heart disease and strokes, which currently kill more than 12 million people a year globally. The *World Health Report 2002: reducing risks, promoting healthy life*, published on 1 November, finds that about 75% of cardiovascular disease can be attributed to the established risks the report examines. This means that a combination of simple steps which governments and individuals can take would make a much greater difference than had been thought.

The major risk factors for cardiovascular disease are high blood pressure, high cholesterol, tobacco use, obesity, physical inactivity and low consumption of fruit and vegetables. Individual lifestyle choices can obviously reduce these risks, a range of common drugs can lower blood pressure, and statins can lower cholesterol. The report estimates that 10–30% of adults in almost all countries suffer from high blood pressure, and a further 50–60% would be in better health if their blood pressure were lower. Combination therapy alone, costing less than US\$ 14 per person per year, would halve this risk.

The report also urges countries to adopt policies and programmes which can lower risk levels for the population as a whole, for instance by reducing salt in processed foods, cutting dietary fat, promoting exercise and higher consumption of fruit and vegetables, and discouraging smoking.

This is no longer a problem for rich countries only. The report finds that most of the world's burden of disease caused by cardiovascular risks is now occurring in developing countries. "We are seeing that conditions like high blood pressure and high cholesterol are much more prominent in developing countries than previously thought," says Anthony Rogers, a WHO consultant from the University of Auckland and one of the main authors of the report. "The world once thought of cardiovascular disease as a Western problem, but clearly this is not the case."

The report can be obtained from www.who.int/whr. Thomson Prentice

(prenticet@who.int), Managing Editor of the World Health Report, can provide more information about it.

Negotiators on tobacco control press ahead

The Intergovernmental Negotiating Body for the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control began its fifth meeting on 15 October. The task was to agree on the text of the Convention, to be presented for adoption by the World Health Assembly in May 2003. The Negotiating Body, which consists of representatives of WHO's Member States, is chaired by Ambassador Luiz de Seixas Corrêa, of Brazil, who told them: "As we enter the crucial phase in the negotiations, I am encouraged by the positive momentum that has been created in the first four sessions, and I would like to stress that we remain on target to adopt the Framework Convention at the Fifty-sixth World Health Assembly."

Many countries are calling for advertising bans, rules that prevent smuggling between and within countries, and pricing measures that make it hard for young people to take up the habit. The negotiators have also called for vigilance towards the tobacco industry's attempts to derail the negotiations. WHO's Director-General, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, stressed the importance of time: "When we started this process tobacco killed 4 million people every year," she said. "Today that figure stands at 4.9 million people per year. Let us all remember that more delays mean more deaths, and more children falling prey to tobacco."

More information on the negotiations can be obtained from Helen Green, information officer, email: greenh@who.int

Alliance upholds the right to sight

Over 7 million people worldwide go blind every year, it is estimated, and 180 million people are thought to be visually disabled. World Sight Day, on 10 October, was organized by VISION 2020, a joint initiative of WHO, the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness

and other UN and nongovernmental organizations, to draw attention to this reality and the urgent need for access to eye care. Such access would reduce the prevalence of blindness by 80%. This could be achieved by the year 2020; hence the name of the Alliance.

Prevention and treatment of vision loss are among the most cost-effective and successful of all health interventions. They include: cataract surgery; prevention of trachoma; provision of ivermectin to treat river blindness; immunization against measles; provision of vitamin A supplements to prevent childhood blindness; and provision of eyeglasses. As none of these measures are highly expensive, blindness occurs most in situations of extreme poverty, causing deeper poverty and suffering in its turn. Following the principle stated in WHO's Constitution, that the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is a fundamental right of every human being, the theme for the awareness day was "The right to sight".

Health situation deteriorates in the occupied Palestinian territory

In May 2002 the World Health Assembly asked WHO's Director-General, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, to visit the occupied Palestinian territory to assess the health situation there. She has not yet been given an opportunity to do so, but issued a brief report on 27 September, compiled from data supplied by WHO field staff, UN agencies, nongovernmental organizations and other bodies working in the communities. The following is an extract from her report.

"One factor affecting the health status of Palestinians is severe damage to the commercial and social infrastructure, with a reduction in retailing (and thus people's ability to access the food-stuffs they need), damage to the water supply, lack of human waste disposal, and problems with the build-up of solid waste. This is further exacerbated by the ongoing conflict with casualties on both sides, which has resulted in continuous physical and mental suffering."

The full text is available from: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/statements/statement04/en/> ■