

## Eradication of polio threatened by global instability

Only 537 cases of poliomyelitis were reported globally in 2001 (data as of 11 April 2002). In 1988, when the polio eradication effort began, the disease was paralysing about 1000 children every day. Global eradication of polio is within reach, but success is by no means inevitable. Stopping transmission of the virus means vaccinating every under-five-year-old who could be exposed to it. The three zones with the highest poliovirus transmission are northern India, Afghanistan/Pakistan, and Nigeria/Niger.

The Technical Consultative Group (TCG) for global polio eradication, which completed its annual review of the programme on 12 April, warned that the campaign could become a casualty of recent global events. In Afghanistan, for example, the polio surveillance system has suffered badly during the last few months. The 10 remaining endemic countries, in order of highest to lowest transmission, are Afghanistan, Angola, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, and Sudan.

The last vestiges of polio must be extinguished now. Any delay will jeopardize the success of the entire effort, the TCG concluded. Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director-General of WHO, endorsed the plea. "I urge the world to finish the job. Eradicate polio while we still have the opportunity," she said. The Global Polio Eradication Initiative is spearheaded by WHO, Rotary International, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and UNICEF. Rotary International, a service organization with over a million members in 163 countries, has contributed US\$ 462 million to polio eradication so far, and is pushing its members for another 80 million to help finish the job. "If we raise this money now, we will be saving all of humankind from this disease for all time, and that's priceless," says Vicente Giay, the Chairman of the Rotary Foundation of Rotary International.

As this issue of the *Bulletin* goes to press, mass immunization campaigns are going on in Afghanistan, Pakistan,

Nigeria, India, Somalia and Sudan as part of their final push to eliminate the virus. National immunization days are planned for all the endemic countries. "We owe it to our children to get the job done", says Carol Bellamy of UNICEF.

## WHO unmasks another killer: inactivity

An estimated 2 million people a year die because they do not take enough exercise. WHO used World Health Day, April 7, to warn the world against inactivity. A sedentary lifestyle could very well be among the 10 leading causes of death in the world, WHO says (for the details, contact Reshma Prakash, prakashr@who.int). Inactivity increases all causes of mortality, doubles the risk of cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and obesity, and increases the risks of colon cancer, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, lipid disorders, depression and anxiety.

Action is required. "Individuals need to take control of their own health and fitness and they need governments and policy-makers to help them," said Gro Harlem Brundtland, WHO's Director-General, in her World Health Day speech. "Physical activity should be the easy option as well as the healthy option. This means implementing transportation policies that make it safer for people to walk and ride bicycles, legislating smoke-free public buildings and spaces, and building accessible parks, playgrounds and community centres." For personal safety the imperative is less demanding: 30 minutes of not too strenuous exercise a day.

## Access to HIV drugs: reliable products listed

On 20 March WHO published a list of 40 HIV medicines that meet its recommended standards (see [www.who.int/medicines](http://www.who.int/medicines)). This is the first list of products to come out of the Access to Quality HIV/AIDS Drugs and Diagnostics project, forming part of a UN-wide strategy to improve access to HIV treatment in poor countries. The

aims of the strategy are to promote the rational use of drugs, affordable prices for drugs and diagnostics, sustainable financing, and reliable supply systems. The drugs listed come from eight manufacturers, and 100 more products from another 13 companies are under review. The list just released includes 11 antiretrovirals allowing for several triple therapy combinations, and 5 products for opportunistic infections. WHO expects the list to grow as more companies participate and countries expand their HIV/AIDS programmes.

The initiative is managed by WHO, uses the expertise of UNICEF and UNAIDS, and is supported by the World Bank and the United Nations Population Fund. Of the 40 million people currently living with AIDS, 28 million are in Africa, and 7.1 million in Asia and the Pacific.

## Policy for ageing announced

At the United Nations Second World Assembly on Ageing, which took place in Madrid from 8 to 12 April, WHO launched *Active Ageing: A Policy Framework* (see [www.who.int/hpr/ageing](http://www.who.int/hpr/ageing)). Its recommendations include: tackling factors that lead to early onset of disability, such as poverty and lack of education; controlling tobacco use and alcohol abuse in all age groups; increasing affordable access to medication and supportive devices such as eye-glasses and walkers; ensuring appropriate nutrition; and supporting care-givers.

Thanks to unprecedented health advances in many parts of the world, the age group of 60 and over is growing faster than any other. This changes the proportion of needs in a society as a whole, and calls for corresponding changes in policy. Alex Kalache, coordinator of the Ageing and Life Programme at WHO, explains: "The right policies will benefit us all. In the first place they will lead to fewer premature deaths in the highly productive stages of life. Good policies will also lead to fewer disabilities and more people enjoying a positive quality of life and actively participating in society as they age." ■