

WHO News

Childhood blindness prevention project launched

On 18 June WHO announced the launch of a global project for the prevention of blindness in children, financed by the Lions Clubs International Foundation. About 500 000 children go blind every year, and half of these cases are preventable. Primary health care approaches that can reduce childhood blindness include immunization against measles and rubella, better nutrition, timely prophylaxis against eye infections in the newborn caused by diseases such as gonococcal infection, and avoidance of harmful eye medicines. Surgery is needed for conditions such as cataract, corneal opacities and glaucoma.

More surgeons who can treat these conditions are needed, as well as provision for early detection and increased access to treatment. The five-year project will focus on training health workers in prevention, early detection and treatment in 30 countries in all six of the WHO regions. It will also establish centres for children's eye care in these countries.

Europe to be certified free of polio

The 51 Member States¹ of WHO's European Region, comprising 870 million people, can now be certified free of polio. The announcement was made in Copenhagen on 21 June by the European Regional Commission for the Certification of Poliomyelitis Eradication (RCC).

The European Region has been free of indigenous polio for over three years. Its last case of indigenous wild-virus poliomyelitis occurred in eastern Turkey in 1998, when a two-year-old unvaccinated boy was paralysed by the disease. Poliovirus imported from other countries remains a threat. In 2001, there were three polio cases among Roma children in Bulgaria and one non-paralytic case in Georgia — all caused by poliovirus originating from the Indian subcontinent.

Of the recent importations, Sir Joseph Smith, Chairman of the RCC, said, "We are satisfied that all measures were taken to ensure that wild poliovirus imported into

the Region did not lead to ongoing circulation. All evidence confirms that. However, our work does not stop here. Throughout the European Region, ongoing vaccination and surveillance are vital. The risk of poliovirus being imported into Europe will continue until we eradicate polio globally."

Since the Global Polio Eradication Initiative was launched in 1988, two WHO regions have been certified polio-free: the Americas in 1994 and the Western Pacific in 2000. Polio cases have dropped from an estimated 350 000 in 125 countries in 1988 to 480 reported cases in 10 countries in 2001.

New treatment for leishmaniasis is 95% effective

Miltefosine (Impavidio®), a new drug against leishmaniasis, has cured 95% of the patients treated with it in clinical trials. About 60 000 people a year die from this parasitic disease, which is also known as kala azar and black fever. Miltefosine, which is likely to cost less than current therapies as well as being more effective and easier to deliver, could save most of these lives. It is the first oral antileishmaniasis drug.

Miltefosine is the result of collaboration between the Government of India, the German biopharmaceutical company, Zentaris, and TDR (Tropical Disease Research), a programme sponsored by the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme and WHO. The new drug has now been approved for use in India, where half the cases of visceral leishmaniasis in the world occur. By using this drug, the Government hopes to eliminate visceral leishmaniasis by 2010.

"The combined efforts of these partners have opened a new era in the fight against visceral leishmaniasis," said WHO's Director-General, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland. "In doing so we can free the poor from one of their many burdens."

Leishmaniasis is one of the "neglected diseases" which afflict the world's poorest people. About 80% of its victims have less than US\$ 2 a day to live on. It is transmitted by the bite of the sandfly. Attacking the liver and spleen, causing fever and weight loss, visceral leishmaniasis is fatal in those with compromised

immune function and poor nutrition unless they obtain treatment.

New cancer report reveals neglected opportunities

Of the 10 million new cases of cancer diagnosed each year a third can be prevented, a third can be effectively treated, and the remaining third can be made to cause much less suffering through appropriate palliative care. That is the main message of *National cancer control programmes: policies and managerial guidelines*, a WHO report launched on 28 June at the International Cancer Congress in Oslo, Norway.

Too often, primary prevention, early detection and palliative care are neglected in favour of treatment-based approaches, regardless of whether they are cost-effective or improve patients' quality of life, the report says. "No matter what the resource constraints of a country, a well-conceived, well-managed programme can improve the national situation and the lives of those living with cancer," said Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, WHO's Director-General. "We cannot allow ourselves to become overly reliant on treatment options at the expense of prevention efforts and palliation."

WHO to promote genetic services

Staff of WHO and the University of Toronto Joint Centre for Bioethics, a newly appointed WHO Collaborating Centre, have outlined a strategy for promoting genetic services with special emphasis on developing countries. The plan includes strengthening the human genetics programme in WHO; developing medical genetic services, such as the prevention and control of genetically caused conditions; enhancing the ethics capacity of developing countries with regard to genetics; and supporting the establishment of undergraduate and graduate study programmes in this area.

The recommendations are the result of discussions held on 9 and 10 April in Toronto. Further information can be found at www.who.int/ncd/hgn ■

¹ Albania, Andorra, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Russian Federation, San Marino, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Uzbekistan, Yugoslavia.