

## WHO was where in November

- Government officials from WHO's 192 Member States gathered in Geneva from **1 to 12 November** to discuss the revision of the International Health Regulations of 1969. The Regulations constitute the main piece of international legislation governing the control of infectious diseases but these need to be brought up to date to address new diseases like AIDS and SARS and other developments over the last three decades. The final draft will be presented to the World Health Assembly for approval in May.
- WHO warned on **8 November** that a sharp increase in demand may cause a shortage between now and March 2005 of the artemisinin-based combination therapy (ACT) artemether-lumefantrine, which is used to treat malaria. ACTs are currently the most effective medicines against falciparum malaria, the deadliest form of the disease. Since 2001, WHO has recommended that countries where malaria is resistant to conventional treatments such as chloroquine should switch to ACTs. WHO currently recommends four ACTs: artemether-lumefantrine, artesunate-mefloquine, artesunate-amodiaquine, and artesunate-sulfadoxine/pyrimethamine. (See picture)
- WHO published a report on **10 November** calling on governments to invest more in their health systems by commissioning and promoting more research into how to improve this area. The report, entitled *World Report on Knowledge for Better Health: Strengthening Health Systems*, argues that research into health systems tends to be under-funded and overlooked in comparison with biomedical research, although it has the potential to dramatically improve health worldwide and help countries meet major development goals. The report argues that governments should make sure that the results of such research are not confined to academia but translated into action to improve public health.
- Major international vaccine manufacturers, regulators, government health officials and WHO experts met in Geneva on **11 and 12 November** to discuss and coordinate efforts to prepare in case there is a flu pandemic among humans, possibly triggered by a strain of avian flu. They discussed how to quickly manufacture and distribute enough vaccine to stricken populations. Influenza experts first became alarmed by bird-to-human transmission of avian flu in 1997. Since then, they believe — but have not found conclusively — that some limited human-to-human transmission has also occurred. Some experts believe that the influenza strains involved in the last three major pandemics of 1918, 1957 and 1968 may have originated from birds.
- An estimated 22 million children aged under five around the world are either obese or overweight, and more than 17 million of those live in developing countries. WHO teamed up with the International Diabetes Federation on **11 November** to fight childhood obesity, which can lead to an increased risk of developing type II diabetes. The link between obesity and diabetes is well-established. Studies show that about 90% of people with diabetes have type II and the vast majority of those are overweight or obese, WHO said.
- Bridging the gap between knowledge and practice in public health was the central theme of a Ministerial Summit on Health Research that took place from **16–20 November**. More than 30 health ministers and other representatives from private and public sectors at the meeting in Mexico City pledged to make research into health systems a priority. They signed the Mexico Agenda for Action calling on governments to give people in developing countries better access to knowledge and to base health policy decisions on scientific evidence. The Agenda also called on governments to allocate at least 2% of their national health budgets to health research and for the establishment of an international clinical trials register.
- WHO said on **18 November** it was awarding a US\$1 million contract to a global consortium of HIV/AIDS treatment activists to help prepare people with HIV/AIDS for antiretroviral treatment. The Collaborative Fund for HIV Treatment Preparedness consortium is managed by the US-based Tides Foundation. It was created in 2003 to fund community education projects across the world.
- A WHO report released on **18 November** concluded that some health needs of people living in Europe and other parts of the world are not adequately addressed by medicines which are currently available and contemporary health research. The report entitled: *Priority Medicines for Europe and the World* was commissioned by the Dutch Government, as current president of the European Union. The aim was to come up with a European research agenda based on health priorities. In their report, the authors from WHO's Essential Medicines and Policy Department identify a priority list of existing medicines and propose areas for new research to address 17 diseases and conditions for which treatment is not reaching patients, does not exist or is inadequate. The report called for immediate action to develop treatment for antibacterial drug resistance and pandemic influenza, for which current treatments or preventive measures are unlikely to be effective in future.



WHO/TDR/Benakis

The *Artemisia annua* plant, which has a high content of artemisinin, was used for centuries to make traditional medicines in China to combat fever. Artemisinin derivatives, usually combined with synthetic compounds, are the active ingredients in several anti-malarial medicines.