WHO issues guidelines for herbal medicines

WHO has released guidelines for ensuring the safety, efficacy and environmental sustainability of the US$ 60 billion a year herbal medicines market amidst an increasing number of reports indicating adverse health reactions caused by the misuse of medicinal plants.

The WHO guidelines on good agricultural and collection practices for medicinal plants, issued on 10 February 2004, are intended for national regulatory bodies and offer advice on cultivation and collection methods, site selection, climate and soil considerations and the correct identification of seeds and plants. They also offer guidance on post-harvest operations such as labelling and legal components including national and regional laws on quality standards, patent status and benefits sharing.

Representing an annual global market of US$ 60 billion every year, herbal medicines account for around 20% of the overall drug market.

According to WHO, up to 80% of the population in Africa depends on traditional medicinal and herbal medicines for primary health care and in China, herbal medicines account for 30–50% of total medicinal consumption. In Europe, North America and other industrialized regions over 50% of the population have used complementary or alternative medicine at least once.

“Of all medicinal and herbal products used in the world and have also become a threat to biodiversity posed by the booming herbal medicines market. Over-harvesting may lead to the extinction of endangered species and the destruction of national habitats and resources,” warned WHO.

Oral diseases increasing in developing countries

Oral diseases such as tooth decay, gum disease and oral and pharyngeal cancers are still a problem in the developed world and have also become a threat to oral health in developing countries, says a new report released on 24 February 2004 by WHO’s Global Oral Health Programme.

According to the report (http://www.who.int/oral_health/publications/report03/en/), an estimated five billion people worldwide have experienced tooth decay. While it appears to be less severe in most African countries, the report states that tooth decay is expected to increase in many developing countries in Africa as a result of the growing consumption of sugars and inadequate exposure to fluorides.