

WHO tobacco convention set to become law by year's end

One of the most rapidly embraced UN conventions — the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control — is set to become binding international law by the end of 2004, just one year after the landmark document originally opened for signature in Geneva.

The Convention closed at the end of June with signatures from 167 WHO Member States as well as the European Community and 23 ratifications or equivalent — over half the number required to make it a legal instrument. Adopted unanimously by all WHO Member States in May last year, it is the first public health treaty negotiated under the auspices of WHO.

Whilst the rapid response to the Convention demonstrates increasing commitment by governments in controlling the epidemic of tobacco-related diseases, WHO Director-General, Dr LEE Jong-wook, said yet more action was needed.

“Although we have good reason to be confident, a relentless effort will still be needed for the foreseeable future. Current projections show a rise of 31% in tobacco-related deaths during the next twenty years, which will double the current death toll, bringing it to almost ten million a year,” said Lee during a meeting of the Intergovernmental Working Group in Geneva which took place between 21 and 25 June. “When the treaty comes into force, national and local activities aimed at reversing these trends will be enormously strengthened. The result will be improved public health and reduced poverty.”

WHO has urged signatory countries to ratify the Convention as soon as possible and is currently helping governments to prepare for the moment the Convention is brought into force.

“The sooner the 40 ratifications are in place, the sooner effective and coordinated actions within the Framework Convention at country level can begin,” said Dr Catherine Le Galès-Camus, Assistant Director-General from WHO's department of Noncommunicable

Diseases and Mental Health. “Countries can rely on WHO for continued support,” she added.

The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control was designed as a tool to manage what WHO describes as the single biggest preventable cause of death. There are currently 1.3 billion smokers worldwide. Half of them — some 650 million people — are expected to die prematurely of a tobacco-related disease.

Containing provisions that set international standards on tobacco price and tax increases, advertising and sponsorship, labelling, illicit trade and passive smoking, the Convention will become law for those countries which have ratified it (or adopted an equivalent instrument) 90 days after the fortieth ratification.

The parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control — those who had ratified it or adopted an equivalent instrument as of 30 June 2004, are Bangladesh, Brunei Darussalam, Cook Islands, Fiji, Hungary, Iceland, India, Japan, Kenya, Maldives, Malta, Mauritius, Mexico, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nauru, New Zealand, Norway, Palau, Seychelles, Singapore, Slovakia and Sri Lanka. ■

New alternative medicine guide launched amidst increasing reports of adverse reactions

Reports of adverse reactions to alternative or traditional medicines have more than doubled in three years, according to WHO which released a new set of guidelines on 22 June. The document, *Developing information on proper use of traditional, complementary and alternative medicine*, is intended to help national authorities develop context-specific and reliable information for consumers who are considering using such medicines.

“WHO supports traditional and alternative medicines when these have demonstrated benefits for the patient and minimal risks,” said WHO Director-General, Dr LEE Jong-wook. “But as more people use these medicines, govern-

ments should have the tools to ensure all stakeholders have the best information about their benefits and their risks.”

Up to 80% of developing country populations rely on traditional medicine for their primary health care, due to cultural tradition or lack of alternatives. In wealthy countries on the other hand, the increasing popularity of natural medicines is based on the sometimes dangerous assumption that natural means safe.

According to WHO, the global increase in the use of traditional and alternative medicines has been accompanied by an increase in reports of adverse reactions. In China, a country where traditional therapies and products are widely used in parallel with conventional medicine, there were 9854 reported cases of adverse drug reactions in 2002 alone, up from 4000 between 1990 and 1999.

According to a WHO survey, 99 out of 142 countries said that the majority of traditional or alternative medicines in their country could be bought without prescription. In 39 countries, many traditional remedies were used for self-medication, bought or prepared by friends or acquaintances of the patient. These trends have raised concerns over the quality of the products used, their appropriateness for the condition and the lack of medical follow-up.

It is hoped that the guidelines will go some way in addressing these concerns. They include, for example, a quick checklist of basic questions to help facilitate proper medicine use. Advice is also provided to government authorities on preparing easy-to-access information and working with the mass media to sensitize and educate the population. Suggestions are given for several health system structures and processes needed to promote proper medicine use. The guidelines do not however, address the problem of poor quality traditional or alternative medicines or inappropriate practices.

The development of the guidelines was carried out with the financial and technical support of the Regional Government of Lombardy, in collaboration with the State University of Milan. The guidelines are based on evidence and