

## Reducing the risks



WHO

Susanne Weber-Mosdorf

Susanne Weber-Mosdorf studied economics, law and political science at the University of Constance in her native Germany and management at the Ecole nationale d'administration in Paris. She worked in the private sector as managing director of Prognos GmbH, an economics research institute, and held a number of government positions, including mayor of the town of Kirchheim unter Teck, permanent secretary at the Ministry of Family Affairs, Women, Further Education and Art in the German State of Baden-Württemberg and director-general for International and European Affairs at the Federal Ministry of Health and Social Security. She joined WHO as assistant director-general for Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments in 2006 and was also appointed special representative for European Union (EU) affairs.

WHO is taking the lead in the global fight against foodborne disease. In September, it launched a new initiative to estimate the global burden of disease in this area, an important first step for gauging the size of the problem and appropriate responses to it.

*Q: You have taken a special interest in food safety. What is WHO doing to help countries prevent foodborne disease?*

A: We need to gauge the scale of the problem in order to address it. Our department for Food Safety, Zoonoses\* and Foodborne Diseases has been collecting information on disease transmitted through food. We are taking this further now with a new global initiative to estimate the global disease burden from foodborne diseases in a comprehensive and systematic way. This initiative was launched in September at an international consultation attended by over 50 experts from around the world.

*Q: How can WHO commit governments to reducing risks posed to health from foodborne disease and other environmental threats?*

A: We are contributing to the revised International Health Regulations that come into force in June 2007. Current emergency procedures for food safety and chemical and nuclear hazards need to be linked to these regulations. Our experts advise countries on how to assess the health risks of a chemical spill, an outbreak of foodborne disease or other environmental disasters. Now, in addition to that, we will advise them on whether the incident has health implications outside the country's borders

and, if it has, we will advise them on how to apply the new regulations. I was involved in negotiations on these regulations while still working as an official of the German government. The revised regulations are an important part of global health governance and form the basis for early detection of and effective defence against international health threats. Our departments help countries to do risk assessment of a wide range of environmental hazards that affect health and security, and we advise them on legislation to help set standards in these areas. We also play an important part in WHO's role of improving and raising awareness of health security, the subject of next year's *World health report*. Environmental protection can play a significant role in reinforcing global health security. For example, environmental risks such as climate change, air pollution, chemical pollutants and damage to ecosystems can reduce health security, while environmental protection can improve the world in which we live. In our work on food safety, protection of the environment, and health and trade, we look closely at the determinants of health: in other words, the factors that cause disease and the strategies that can prevent ill-health. I am pleased that these determinants feature more prominently in work plans for the next few years for the whole organization.

*Q: Why is trade important to global health? What is the significance of the World Health Assembly resolution on trade and health passed in May 2006 (WHA 59.26)?*

A: This resolution has given WHO the mandate to strengthen the knowledge and evidence base of ministries of health and thus enable them to work more effectively with their colleagues in the ministries of trade, commerce and finance. As part of this work on global trade and health, we examine how trade relations may be used to promote trade between countries that could result in improved health, for example in our work on consumer and food protection. Trade in food products has grown rapidly due to trade liberalization. Today, food is one of the most widely traded commodities.

*Q: How is WHO helping countries make this widely traded commodity safer?*

A: It is our responsibility to promote food safety. That way we can prevent millions if not billions of cases of foodborne illness — before it debilitates people and detracts from the nutrition food should give. In particular, our goal is to help significantly reduce the disease risk from microbiological and chemical contaminants in food in the coming 5 to 10 years. We are also working to

\* diseases transmitted from animals to humans.

ensure that food of animal origin does not bring with it unwanted and unexpected consequences such as the occurrence of resistance to antimicrobials or antibiotics that we use to treat disease in humans. This is a result of the use of antibiotics in animal fodder, which contributes to the emergence of antimicrobial resistance in pathogens, such as *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter*, that are transmitted to humans via contaminated meat. And we should not forget our preventive work related to avian

influenza. Here, we have focused both on occupational and food-safety aspects, promoting simple messages to avoid transmission of the virus by following sensible rules for contact with poultry and its slaughter and preparation.

*Q: How effective is the Codex Alimentarius for fighting foodborne disease?*

A: Despite some of its weaknesses, such as the slow and cumbersome administrative procedures, the Codex Alimentarius is an important means

of setting food safety standards based on independent scientific advice. WHO's collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization and other UN agencies in establishing these food standards has helped to improve the lives of people worldwide and to facilitate international trade in food. We need to work towards a greater use of existing trade mechanisms, such as aid for trade, to help developing countries improve risk assessment and risk management systems for food safety. ■

## Recent news from WHO

- **Dr Margaret Chan** of China, 59, was appointed as WHO's **new director-general** on 9 November, following the untimely death of Dr Lee Jong-wook in May 2006. She was one of five candidates shortlisted from 13 by WHO's Executive Board for the post. The others were Dr Kazem Behbehani of Kuwait, Dr Julio Frenk of Mexico, Dr Shigeru Omi of Japan and Elena Salgado Méndez of Spain. The 34-member board elected her on 8 November and this appointment was confirmed at a one-day session of the World Health Assembly on 9 November. Her term runs from 4 January 2007 to 30 June 2012. Chan pledged to take forward the legacy of Dr Lee and his predecessor, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland. Chan paid tribute to the late Dr Lee for his work, particularly the "3 by 5" campaign to provide treatment for people with HIV/AIDS. "I have the determination to achieve results for health," she told the Executive Board after her election. "We have to be smart in our planning and priority-setting and streetwise in our actions. I will work tirelessly with my eyes on the goal and my ears open to the voices of all." Chan is a well-known public figure because of her record of leadership in fighting disease first in Hong Kong\*, and more recently at WHO. Chan started her career in public health in 1978 at the Hong Kong Department of Health. In 1994, she was appointed director of health of Hong Kong and during her nine-year tenure confronted the first human outbreak of H5N1 avian influenza in 1997 and successfully defeated severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China in 2003. She also introduced primary health care "from the diaper to the grave" with a focus on health promotion and disease prevention, self-care and healthy lifestyles. After two decades of working closely with WHO, Chan joined WHO as director of the Department of Protection of the Human Environment in 2003. In June 2005, she became assistant director-general for the Communicable Diseases cluster of departments and, at the same time, took up the newly-created post of representative of the director-general for pandemic influenza. Chan obtained her MD degree from the University of Western Ontario, Canada, in 1977.
- The board of the **Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria** said on 2 November it would continue to search for a new executive director. The decision came after board members failed to agree on one of five shortlisted candidates.
- WHO and a group of more than 25 partner organizations unveiled a new strategy on 26 October to fight some of the most **neglected tropical diseases** that destroy the lives and health of poor people around the world. The approach explained in a new manual, *Preventive Chemotherapy in Human Helminthiasis*, focuses on how to use a set of low-cost or free drugs in developing countries to control diseases caused by worm infections.
- Winstone Zulu, a TB/HIV activist from Zambia, and Dr L S Chauhan, National TB Control Programme manager from India, won the **Stop TB Partnership Kochon Prize**, in recognition of their contribution to TB control. The prize was inaugurated this year.
- WHO warned on 23 October that the world would be several billion doses short of the amount of **pandemic influenza vaccine** needed to protect the global population should an influenza pandemic occur in the near future. Dr Marie-Paule Kieny, director of the WHO Initiative for Vaccine Research, called for immediate and sustained action and funding for activities within WHO's new global pandemic influenza action plan to increase vaccine supply.
- WHO issued a practical guide to help countries prevent **violence against children** on 16 October. The guide, *Preventing child maltreatment: a guide to taking action and generating evidence*, published by WHO and the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, shows how violence against children can be prevented.

\* Hong Kong, a British colony, became the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China on 1 July 1997.

For more about these and other WHO news items, please see: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/events/2006/en/index.html>



Dr Margaret Chan

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