

Environmental Health Update

Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments



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Focus of the month

Public health and the environment: Making the right choices for health!

The holistic nature of health is by now an accepted fact; the World Health Organization's definition of health as being "a complete state of physical and mental well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" has been a telling reminder, for the past 60 years, of the comprehensiveness of this concept of health. Unfortunately however, in many national health services systems, the action on the ground does not quite match the exhortations to think in terms of holistic care, as evidenced by the prevailing bias towards clinical care. While health is a feeling or sense of well-being that is felt by the mind, it is also a state of the human body, as being in



Scurrying for precious water!

good working order for us to carry out our daily tasks of living. And indeed, we can achieve it through our own responsible behaviour, given some enabling conditions. In a social change process that is increasingly more aware of the well-being concept of health, government needs to be more active.

A shift in thinking about health from simply keeping alive to being healthy is also behind WHO's now-in-vogue measurements of the quality of life – the disability adjusted life years (DALYs), and the concept of health expectancy (instead of life expectancy), or the idea of adding life to our years (instead of just years to our lives).



Urban Settings – where do the children play?

All these indicate the move from a parochial attitude of health being a disease concept to one of well-being – achievable by exercising both mind and body and ensuring the preservation of the environment that we live in. In a recent publication on the burden of disease, WHO revealed that at least 25 percent of the morbidity in developing countries is attributable to preventable causes in the environment¹.

Yet, the health systems of our countries spend a disproportionate amount of money and effort to mend broken bodies rather than address the responsible risk factors that abound in our ambient environment. Why can't we arrive at a more balanced way of approaching these? When we look for the causes of this imbalance within our health sectors, we witness policies, institutions, staffing and procedures that are inordinately clinically biased towards individualized patient care, and the woeful neglect of public health interventions. This state of affairs has historical origins, for it was the caring of the sick that was the beginning of the health care profession – thus caring for the diseased becomes paramount. The first hospitals were places where people went to die as a last resort. Later these evolved into institutions of education, research, treatment and rehabilitation. But while

¹Preventing Disease Through Healthy Environments: Towards an estimate of the environmental burden of disease, World Health Organization, 2006.

Highlights

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Plastic graveyard!

the concept of health has evolved over time (as indicated by WHO's definition of health) to embody the well-being aspects, the health-care profession in most of our developing countries is frozen in time. Clinically oriented professionals occupy critical vantage points in policy and power structures in the administration of our national health systems, and huge amounts of funds still go for institutional care rather than to public health². Even with repeated calls and advocacy for "health in development", from the UN development conferences of the 1990s to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the reticence of national health policy and programme structures and instruments to move forward is palpable. But we need to move; burgeoning issues such as SARS, avian influenza and climate change will catch us all unawares if we don't. The loss may then be too grave and the catch-up too difficult. The shift to a holistic public health approach, put off for so long, is now imperative.

This year, the EHU newsletter will focus its next eleven issues on the public health aspects of the environment. In

²WHO National Health Accounts data base, 2005 (75:5 — personal health: preventive)

a sense, this is an effort to continue advocacy for change at the neglected public health dimension. We will try to highlight the linkages between the environmental dimension and several disciplines in our national health services so that we may begin a dialogue in-house (within WHO) and within our health technical community. Disciplines such as communicable diseases, family and child health, health systems development, health technology, medicines and pharmaceuticals, vaccines and other biologicals, health security and emergencies, noncommunicable diseases and mental health are some such areas of relevance that must recognize the benefits from protecting the environment.



Pollution - turning rivers into sewers!

Success in each of these areas is inextricably related to the quality of the environment. However much we, entrenched in our bureaucracies, may try to isolate ourselves into professional cocoons, this reality of the harmony in health must be accepted. The fear and insecurity of losing control and authority when we team with others must give way to an openness that celebrates the holism of our effort to bring health and well-being to the peoples of our countries.

SDE news

International Year of Sanitation calls for intensified UN agency and stakeholder collaborative action



The UN General Assembly declared 2008 as the International Year of Sanitation (IYS). This declaration highlights the need for improving the sanitation coverage so needed to meet the MDG target of halving by 2015 the proportion of people without access to basic sanitation. It calls for joint efforts by UN agencies and other stakeholders to address sanitation issues at all levels. To put it into action, WHO is drafting a strategy to guide WHO's participation in the IYS activities. These include advocacy for policy changes, improvement of stakeholders' access to sanitation, and health information and enhancement of partnerships and linkages with key stakeholders and their programmes. For details please contact Mrs Payden at payden@searo.who.int.

EH NEWS

Maldives prepares national guideline for water, sanitation and hygiene education in schools

The Ministry of Education, Government of Maldives organized a national expert group meeting in Male on "Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Education in Schools" on 17-18 November 2007. The objectives of the meeting were to create a healthy and safe learning environment in schools, promote safe water, sanitation and hygiene education among the students and help students adapt to skills-based hygiene education. With participation from Ministries of Education, Health, Housing and Construction,

the Maldives Water and Sanitation Authority, the Educational Development Centre, the Department of Public Health, some island schools and NGOs, the meeting reviewed and revised a draft guideline proposed by the Ministry of Education (MoE). As the meeting's resource, WHO-SEARO gathered suitable experts in the field of school health from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand. This marks the continued effort of WHO to bring multiple ministries together for dialogue on national health matters in the pursuit of intersectoral collaboration. Two WHO-SEARO Regional Advisers, Dr Davison Munodawafa (Regional Adviser, Health Promotion) and Mrs Payden (Regional Adviser, Water, Sanitation and Health), provided further technical input and coordination for the meeting. For further details contact Dr Davison Munodawafa at munodawafad@searo.who.int.

SDE Welcomes new colleague



Mr Sharad Prasad Adhikary (Nepal) has joined us as Environmental Health Adviser for WHO Indonesia with effect from 7 February 2008. He will be responsible for promoting, advising on and assisting in developing and

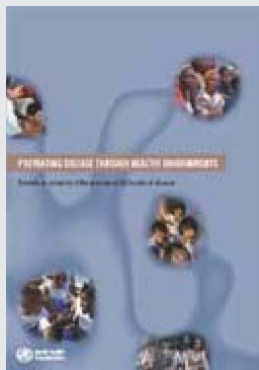
implementing WHO-Indonesia collaborative environmental health activities. A national of Nepal, Sharad brings to the job several years of national and international experience in environmental health programme management and networking with other related sectors and stakeholders. EHU gives Sharad a hearty welcome!

Upcoming Events

- International Water Association (IWA) Water Safety Plan Workshop, Indore, India, 8 February 2008. Website: www.iwahq.org.uk.
- 11th Asian Congress of Agricultural Medicine and Rural Health, Aurangabad, Maharashtra, India, 22-24 February 2008. Website: www.pravara.com.
- First Meeting of the International Network for Water Regulators, Geneva, Switzerland, 21-22 February 2008 being organized by Coordinator, AMR, WHO HQ.
- 7th April 2008 WORLD HEALTH DAY 2008: "PROTECTING HEALTH FROM CLIMATE CHANGE". The goals are to raise awareness and public understanding of the health consequences of climate change; show the impact of the interdependency between health and climate change on national and international decisions and policies and demonstrate WHO's role in facing the challenges globally and in regions, countries and communities; spark commitment among governments, international organizations, donors, civil society, businesses and communities (especially among young people) to collaborate in putting health at the heart of the climate change agenda. More information available with Mr Alexander Hildebrand (hildebranda@searo.who.int).
- Eighteenth World Congress on Safety and Health at work, Seoul, 30 June – 2 July 2008, organized by WHO/HQ, Geneva, Switzerland.

Publications and Learning Materials

Preventing disease through healthy environments



The WHO report entitled "**Preventing disease through healthy environments - towards an estimate of the environmental burden of disease**", is the most comprehensive and systematic study yet undertaken on how *preventable* environmental hazards contribute to a wide range of diseases and injuries.

The report estimates that as much as 24% of global disease is caused by environmental exposures that can be averted. Well-targeted interventions can prevent much of this environmental risk. The report further estimates that more than 33% of disease in children under the age of five is caused by environmental exposures. This report provides an opportunity to increase awareness and understanding of the importance of the health and environment linkages among diverse target audiences, thereby helping to make public health and environment an important priority on the world's political/health/development agenda. It is an interesting shift in the perspective of our programme to put more overt focus on disease prevention and the public health dimension. The report can be found on the website: http://www.who.int/entity/quantifying_ehimpacts/publications/preventingdisease/en/index.html

Healthy Villingili Island – A Progress Review



This is a review of the progress of a Healthy Island programme activity conducted in Villingili Island, in Gaaf Alif Atoll, Maldives from 2002-2004, with participation of major community groups, such as representatives of the atoll and island development committees, the atoll chief, the women's development committee members,

the business community leaders, school teachers, youth and fishermen's group representatives. WHO facilitated the initiation workshop, progress monitoring and assessment of the first two-year project period. Thus this publication documents a valuable Healthy Settings case study of how an isolated island community in Maldives mustered its collective energy to meet a few critical needs it felt were necessary for promoting its health. It documents the effort the community expended, the gains achieved and the unfortunate final devastation exacted by the December 2004 tsunami of the good work done. The First Regional Training course for Healthy Settings Coordinators hosted by Maldives on 13-15 November 2007 (reported in the December 2007 issue of EHU) used this as resource material.³ (Document available at the link <http://www.searo.who.int/EN/Section23/Section24/Section28.htm>)

³This training course was facilitated by Dr Surender Aggarwal (Professor, Department of Geography, University of Delhi, surinder_aggarwal@hotmail.com), Dr Davison Munodawafa (Regional Adviser, Health Promotion, WHO SEARO, munodawafad@searo.who.int) and Dr Abdul Sattar Yoosuf (Director, WHO SEARO, yoosufa@searo.who.int).

Previous issues of Environmental Health Update are available at http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section23_12688.htm

TIPS for Green Behaviour

Let us turn off electrical equipment like televisions, videos, stereos, computers, printers, fax machines etc. when they are not in use. They can use between 10-60% of the power when on "stand-by" mode. Also let us turn off lights and unplug electronic equipment and wires from the power source when not in use. These will reduce considerably our monthly energy bills and help conserve precious energy resources.

SDE Focal Points

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