

Environmental Health Update

Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments



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Focus of the month

Environment and Communicable Diseases – a need for the serious adoption of the Preventive Ethic!

All communicable diseases have their origins in the environment. Whether it be through the air we breathe, the food we eat or the dirt that may



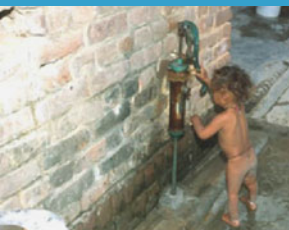
accumulate on our bodies. The germs we catch are in our ambient surroundings, and how we protect ourselves from these determines whether we get sick or not. Diarrhoea is in the polluted water we drink; salmonella in infected poultry that is not cooked well; malaria and dengue from mosquitoes that breed in the water that collects in the containers we throw away into our garbage dumps, or myriad other places that collect or pool water for long enough to host breeding. Tuberculosis and the flu are in the fine droplets that emanate when we speak, cough or sneeze without covering our mouths, and are easily passed in the sharing of congested space and housing that can lead to exposure for hours on end.

Fortifying our bodily defenses or improving the conditions of our surroundings are two major approaches to keep ourselves healthy. The latter



is by the far the more effective approach, embodied in the age old phrase “prevention is better than cure”. By merely keeping our surroundings clean and hygienic we can prevent about 80 percent of our daily health ailments. Yet, we look inward towards the clinical approach, where we focus on fortifying the body, by expanding immunity or seeking a cure by going to the doctor when we get sick. When such services are within easy access, this medical approach to health may seem sensible. But the woeful lack of access to, and quality of health services in most of our countries negates a total reliance on this curative method. For the poor, the physical and financial constraints further exacerbate this issue of access; commuting costs and doctor consultation fees eat deep into their already meager disposable income. Instead, it is through the preventive approach of cleaning up the environment, and providing at least the minimum of safe water and sanitation that the poor in our countries will have a chance of being healthy.

History provides ample evidence of the significant effect prevention has had on the health of many nations. Western Europe and the United States had their epidemiological transition squarely responsible to the expansion of preventive services. Omran and McKeown attest that it was indeed the surge in preventive action



in the western world that led to the plummeting of communicable diseases there¹. Availability of clean water and sanitation facilities, combined with people practicing hygienic behavior led to the reduction of disease.

These preventive behaviors are well within the reach of our common populations – given proper awareness and the enabling conditions of a healthy environment. Yet we are still drawn to the pull of the glitzy hospital or the power of clinical procedures and magic-bullet pharmaceuticals. We are left to the mercy of quick fixes that give momentary succor rather than sustained health. Should our health leaders not learn the lessons from these ecological truths and scientific evidence? Should we not seek to change the lot of the masses of the poor and neglected in our communities to give them their right to sustainable health? After all, the world's leaders are constantly recommending this approach at global conferences and ministerial forums.

¹Omran AR. The epidemiological transition; a theory of the epidemiology of population change, *Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly*, 1971, 29: 509-538.
McKeown T, Record RG. Reasons for the decline in mortality in England and Wales during the nineteenth century. *Population Studies*, 1962 16: 94-122



Back at home, however, these need to be put into practice. Simple and effective technology is available. We need to go back to the basics of epidemiology, and take a moral stand on the policies and strategies to health service delivery to our communities. We need a paradigm shift that would mainstream effective environmental interventions within national disease control programmes and the serious adoption of the preventive ethic.

SDE News

Water Safety Workshop organized by the International Water Association (IWA)

To highlight benefits of water safety plans (WSPs) for improving drinking water quality and identifying implementation barriers, the Indian Water Works Association (IWWA) annual conference held on 8 February 2008 in Indore, India, hosted an important parallel workshop on WSPs. The workshop was attended by 40 participants. These included researchers, practitioners, policy-makers from India and representatives from international organizations such as Public Utility Board

(PUB) Singapore, WHO, UNICEF and USEPA. Participants were introduced to WHO's framework on safe drinking water and its main element - water safety plans. The International Water Association (IWA), USEPA and WHO-SEARO presented the international and regional experiences and the support for promoting WSPs. WHO India office presented case studies on implementation of WSPs in several utilities as well as during natural disasters; a Cranfield University student presented a research study on asset management; and NEERI and UNICEF presented cases from WSP implementation in rural areas and schools.

The WSP is a very simple and cost effective tool for promoting water quality and subsequently sustained community health. Many collaborating partners appreciate the WSP concept and have adopted the approach in several communities. Case studies presented at the workshop indicated WSP implementation in urban utilities as well as small rural water schemes, which have led to substantial improvement in water quality and sustainable systems. For details contact Mrs Payden at Payden@searo.who.int.



Indoor air pollution – A human rights concern for Nepal

Indoor air pollution (IAP) is a severe human rights concern in developing countries. It has significant negative socioeconomic and health impacts in Nepal, and to tackle the problem, WHO, Indoor Air Pollution and Health Forum Nepal, and Practical Action Nepal organized a national

