

Environmental Health Update

Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments



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Focus of the month

It is now five months since the WHO elevated the alert on the global swine flu to the pandemic phase 6 indicating that the world was in the throes of a pandemic. This highest level of pandemic alert indicates the magnitude of the impending danger of the disease spreading to all parts of the world, and the compelling need for the global community to be vigilant and initiate remedial action. By end September more than 190 countries are affected, with at least 350 000 recorded cases and almost 5 000 deaths. Everyday sees a flood of information on this pandemic and we are perhaps better informed and equipped on account of this information. However, the urgent need of the day is that we use this information and understanding to initiate the necessary behaviour change among the people to avoid falling sick.

The real wisdom lies in prevention: the way to safeguard entire communities from contracting illness. There is, however, no doubt that medicines also have to be readily available when diseases strike.

As with most common ailments, preventive personal behaviour protects us from at least three quarters of our daily health challenges and common potential ailments. Diarrhoea, the flu, colds and coughs, burns, poisonings, cancers, skin infections, snakebites and what have you are first preventable, and then curable with good medicament. Similarly, prevention against swine flu, being a droplet-based infection, requires diligent personal hygiene to create a safe environment that precludes person-to-person transmission. Unprotected coughing, sneezing and spitting in public are the biggest causes of such transmission. Covering our mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing helps protect others from any infection we may harbour. Such responsible behaviour is necessary to protect the many people who interact with us at work or home daily. Even apart from this pandemic of swine flu, seasonal influenzas spread among people through the same route.



**To stay healthy and avoid infections like the Flu, the Common Cold & SARS
...always practice**

Respiratory Etiquette

- ◆ **Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or your arm when coughing and sneezing**
- ◆ **Practice good hand hygiene**



There are two approaches to mitigate illness: prevention and cure. Which of the two should we choose? Actually there is no choice because both approaches are needed. But obviously, as is always the case with health, prevention must come before cure. We cannot wait to get sick.

So why is this epidemic of swine flu so important? The answer lies in its uncertainty. The technical jury is as yet uncertain on the behaviour of the virus. There is little information about the ability of the virus to re-assort with other viruses, or the possibility of more virulent strains emerging that could infect harder, spread wider and kill faster. Uncertainty brings with it fear even when we are aware of what can be done. So we go back to the basic dictum or prevention being better than cure and take an elementary lesson from public health: be more hygienic in our behaviour, and practise sanitizing habits with more vigilance instead of merely taking the role of our municipal and public health authorities for granted. Occurrences such as these serve as a wake-up call to us to more actively

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participate in the management of our lives. Undoubtedly vaccines and the magic bullets of cure that follow are the ultimate comfort zones everyone seeks every time there is sickness. But let's not get too complacent and passively settle into this zone and wake up only when another scare emerges. And in this era of global warming and climatic variability we will surely see more such new viruses and scares emerge. And even then it will be our healthy behaviour that will keep our bodies intact till the right cure is found.

The environment is the source of all our health risks. We look at the environment within us or that outside us depending on how the treatments are meted out. For those conditions that arise from inside us, solutions are often sought at a medical practitioner's office. But onslaughts from outside our bodies can only be tackled by preventive action. These relate to the practise of personal hygiene and keeping our physical surroundings clean. Solid waste accumulation, air and water pollution, and chemical contamination are major causes of health insults to our bodies. To these perhaps we can also add the sources of our social, economic and even spiritual environments from where we derive the values by which we live our lives. From these emerge the standards of ethical and responsible behaviour. Social, economic and spiritual principles mould our world view

on issues such as practising compassion and values such as commitment, sharing and love. Viewed on a canvas of the bigger picture, preventive action against swine flu can be gleaned on all these fronts. Social responsibility, philanthropy, and caring for our community as we do for ourselves are all environmental determinants that aid the process of fostering healthy communities.

It is during these critically defining moments that grip us with fear and uncertainty that we can raise the bar of social responsibility higher. How often do we see health promotion programmes advocate the virtues of hygiene and hand washing? Or the need for protecting our water resources and the air we breathe? Or the dangers of smoking cigarettes, overindulging in fast food, or leading a sedentary lifestyle? Relaxed and ensconced in the lap of modern comforts, we are often desensitized from our social responsibilities and those of those around us. In the ultimate analysis, we are an integral part of the ecology that we thrive in. We are both beneficiary and contributor, in roles that are not mutually exclusive. We reap from what we give to society. Yes, the environment is for us to respect because it is our life blood. We must consume and use frugally, or future generations will be hard-pressed to survive in the depleted environment that we leave for them. Yes, the environment matters ... more than ever!!

*Dr Abdul Sattar Yoosuf, SDE – Editor
(yoosufa@searo.who.int)*

SDE news

Nepal moves ahead with Healthy Settings

Nepal reports a good decade of history in its practise of the Healthy Settings process. Following the example of what began in the American and the European Regions of WHO as the Healthy City programme, the South-East Asia Region has transformed this label to the more general and inclusive term "Healthy Settings".

In Nepal, this Healthy Settings process was hinged to the Nepal Environmental Health Initiative (NEHI) developed by the government, in collaboration with WHOM, in 1994 as a means to quickly ensure and implement local health action. Through a combination of networking, coordination and capacity-building actions, the following steps were taken to further the work of the National Healthy Settings Programme in Nepal. It worked on establishing a Healthy Settings team in all municipalities through the review and understanding of each municipality's physical, social and environmental, and economic determinants of health. It reviewed its sector policies and plans, identified relevant sector partners, and then incorporated the concept of healthy settings in the physical, social, economic and environmental planning

of the setting. The implementation focus was on continuous monitoring and networking among the various municipalities, and the development of a Healthy Settings Coordination Resource Centre.

In Nepal too, the Healthy City process aims to create a healthy and vibrant community setting through the community's involvement in the proper panning of its physical, social and the economic environment so that sustainable health development can be achieved and maintained. *For more information, please contact Mr Namraj Khatri, National Professional Officer, WHO Nepal, Kathmandu (khatrin@searo.who.int).*

Sri Lanka MoH revises water quality guidelines

A national-level committee on drinking water quality surveillance recently revised the guidelines for water quality surveillance in Sri Lanka and shared it widely with all local health offices and municipal councils. The guidelines provide clear directions to health workers at the divisional and district level to make effective use of the findings of the water quality and disease surveillance, and of related

sanitary inspections while planning and implementing effective waterborne disease prevention and control activities. The guidelines also include sound supervisory responsibilities to local public health inspectors for promoting community health and education and awareness of hygiene.

WHO has supported the Ministry of Health of Sri Lanka to improve water quality testing facilities at the district level and to bolster staff training facilities. *For more information please contact Dr Harris Yakandawala, EH Focal Point, WHO Country Office, Colombo, Sri Lanka, at yakandawalah@searo.who.int.*

“Deeply Superficial”: A mother’s soulful cry for help!

SDE SEARO has produced a 26-minute documentary film titled *Deeply Superficial* on the environmental plight of the river Ganga in India. The film narrates the river’s utility and goes on to highlight the stress that it has endured over the decades from inexorable and rapid urbanization and the relentless increase in human population and settlements. The film vividly depicts how the incessant accumulation of contamination and domestic, municipal and industrial refuse and waste is choking this marvel of Nature which has since time immemorial been a blessing to humankind. The consequences of the relentless pollution of the Ganga on human health have also been depicted in detail.



GANGA – The River of Opportunity

The film also narrates examples of best practices pursued by WHO and some partners in Nepal, India and Bangladesh, the three countries traversed by the Ganga and its tributaries. Filmed on location in Bangladesh, India and Nepal, it is to be shared widely to heighten awareness and reiterate the urgent need to protect our dwindling global fresh water resources. The fact remains that the Ganga is only one such example; there are many rivers and waterbodies facing a similar crisis in the Member countries of the South-East Asia Region. We need to act NOW!

For more information, please contact Ms Payden, Regional Adviser, Water, Sanitation & Health, at Payden@searo.who.int.

EH News

Water Quality Partnership: WHO/AusAID prepares for Phase 2.

AusAID and WHO have agreed to explore the establishment of a second phase of their Water Quality Partnership, building on the successes of and lessons learned in Phase 1. A target country detailed scoping exercise jointly conducted by AusAID consultants and WHO staff has formulated a bridging phase project for Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. The exercise was carried out through visits to these countries between 17 August 2009 and 4 September 2009. The country visits resulted in finalizing the Phase 2 proposal, agreeing on the water safety plan scaling-up strategies, and understanding the roles of various partners in implementing Phase 2.

WHO and AusAID entered into a partnership in 2005 to support a project on “Accelerating effective water, sanitation and hygiene management for health with primary emphasis on the Asian Region”. This project was jointly implemented by WHO headquarters and the WHO Regional Offices for South-East Asia (SEARO) and the Western Pacific (WPRO). It concluded in December 2008. Countries that benefited from the project are Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and Thailand. During the first phase of the project country capacities were built, pilot projects on water safety plans regarding rural and peri-urban water supply systems were successfully carried out, and water safety plan manuals and strategies for scaling up were developed in some countries.

For more information, please contact Ms Payden, Regional Adviser, Water, Sanitation & Health, at Payden@searo.who.int.

Visits and missions

WKC prepares for World Health Day

Dr Abdul Sattar Yoosuf, Director, Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments (SDE), WHO SEARO, visited the WHO Kobe Centre (WKC), Japan, on 15-17 June 2009 to attend the planning meeting for the World Health Day (WHD) preparations that the WHO Kobe Centre will spearhead in 2010 on the theme "Urbanization and Health". The meeting also agreed on programme collaboration among the WHO Regional Offices and the Kobe Centre for the period 2010-2011.

Dr Jacob Kumaresan, Director, WHO Kobe Centre, highlighted the need for a good and viable research agenda and stressed the role of multiple partners for getting such work done. The outcome was consensus on a timeline for the WHD campaign to carry out with UN-HABITAT as partner. The consensus outlined the areas for collaborative action. Priority was given to consideration of using the Healthy Settings process more effectively in promoting health in urban settings. Also, the Expo 2010 in Shanghai and the "1000 Cities, 1000 Lives" campaign with the theme "urban health matters" were announced.

Kolkata meeting outlines generic protocol on Climate Change and Health Research

WHO facilitated a national consultation on research to assess the impact of climate change on communicable disease in Kolkata, India, on 24-27 August 2009. It was attended by prominent national research institutes from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Indonesia and Sri Lanka and by the WHO Kobe Centre. This meeting, jointly coordinated by the CDS and SDE departments in WHO SEARO, had as its primary objective discussions on a generic research protocol that could be adapted to both retrospective and prospective studies. As an underlying issue, however, the meeting also addressed the continuing need for basing the health effects of climate change arguments on tangible facts that is essential to formulate sound health sector policy. The Communicable Diseases (CDS) department was represented by its Director, Dr Jai Narain, and Dr A.P. Dash, Regional Adviser VBN, while SDE was represented by its Director Dr Abdul Sattar Yoosuf. Dr Sattar presented the overall situation of climate change (CC) and health and the status of the actions taken

in this context by Member States of the WHO South-East Asia (SEA) Region and the Regional Office (SEARO). The imperative need to strongly focus on the research-to-policy interplay was also articulated. *For details please contact Dr Sattar Yoosuf at yoosufa@searo.who.int.*

Bhutan and Bangladesh accord high priority to workers' health

Dr Salma Burton, OCH, visited Bhutan from 5 July 2009 to 12 July 2009 to guide the national review of Bhutan's occupational health programme for 2008-2009 and assist to plan its biennium actions for 2010-2011. Bhutan accords high priority to occupational health and the stakeholder meeting held during this visit oriented a range of sectors about what an occupational health programme should involve. Bhutan's current ICD-10 recording of diseases and health problems does not enable a clear attribution of diseases to occupations or workplaces except in the case of injuries. To better understand the variety of morbidities the Ministry of Health plans to collate additional information on workers' health through short-term surveys.

Dr Burton also visited Bangladesh from 22 August 2009 to 27 August 2009 to identify priority occupational service issues and meet key partners to discuss the possibility of strengthening partnerships with stakeholders and how to scale up OCH activities.

Bangladesh's labour laws do not include provisions for the self employed and the informal sector. The Government of Bangladesh, however, is now of the opinion that occupational health and safety issues are important enough to merit even a standalone national policy charting clear goals and recommended action to improve the occupational health services (OHS) at the national and other levels. WHO is working with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to take this forward. WHO will make its OCH work more strategic in the future and lay particular emphasis on the hugely neglected informal sector.

For more information, please contact Dr Salma Burton, Regional Adviser, Occupational Health, at burtons@searo.who.int.

Publications and learning materials

E-learning course on health and human rights



The Health and Human Rights team in WHO headquarters and InWent Capacity Building International, Germany, have organized an e-learning course on health and human rights since 2006. This online training aims to increase clarity and understanding about the important synergy between

health and human rights.

The course is free of charge and is intended for public health professionals, representatives of ministries of health and other government officials, national human rights commissions, civil society and staff from UN organizations.

The course aims to build the capacity of the participants to recognize the key linkages between health and human rights, apply a human rights-based approach to their work, understand the legal framework of human rights, and analyze public health policies from a human rights perspective.

Background information can be found on <http://www.who.int/hhr/news/en/>. For course announcement, application form and further details please contact Riikka Rantala (HHR) at rantalar@searo.who.int.

This E-learning course could provide a great opportunity to learn the nuances of how to apply human rights to your work. We look forward to your registration!

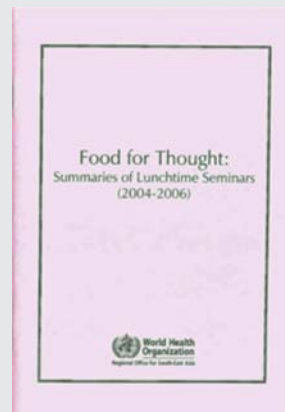
Ecosan Expert Training Course for the Introduction of Ecological Sanitation in Bhutan

The Ecosan Expert Training Course for the Introduction of Ecological Sanitation in Bhutan was held in Kathmandu, Nepal, in January 2009. It was organized by Seecon International, Switzerland, for WHO with partial support from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Aimed at introducing ecological sanitation technologies in Bhutan, 20 local key stakeholders comprising engineers, agriculture officers, health workers and school-teachers from various districts of Bhutan

took part in an intensive training in ecological sanitation through this course. Participants outlined feasible ecological sanitation options for Bhutan and worked out detailed action plans for four ecosan pilot projects in four different districts (*dzongkhags*) of the country.

For more information, please contact Ms Payden, Regional Adviser, Water, Sanitation & Health, at Payden@searo.who.int.

Food for Thought: Summaries of Lunchtime Seminars (2004-2006)



The Thursday Lunchtime Seminars held in the Goa Room of the Regional Office for South-East Asia commenced in June 2004. An event keenly looked forward to by staff every week, the seminars are meant to provide an informal forum for staff to share vignettes from their experiences and nuggets of information on a wide

gamut of issues through informal presentations shared over lunch. This internal publication contains the synopsis of presentations made during the first two years of instituting the seminars. Short textual abstracts from each of these presentations and the major discussion points are included in this very readable publication. The document is accompanied by a CD-ROM which includes the relevant PowerPoint presentations made during these seminars.

For copies of the publication please contact SDE at sde@searo.who.int.

Report on Healthy Settings Coordinators Training in Indonesia

This is a report of the national workshop on Training Healthy Settings Coordinators held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, on 25-27 February 2009. It is a continuation of the work aimed at creating a critical mass of Healthy Settings coordinators in the South-East Asia Region. It is hoped that such a critical mass of practitioners created by this type of training will energize the programme in the future, and ensure strong programme sustainability built into the local processes.

Appreciation and commendations

We have received appreciation from Fathimath Shafeeqa, Country Manager, Live & Learn Environmental Education, Maldives, for the article on “Eco-farming by utilizing urine separation and the biogas process” published in our last issue. She has called this an exciting project which can be tried out in the Maldives. Her NGO has collaborated with communities to utilize kitchen and yard waste to produce fertilizer for agricultural plots for island farming communities.

TIPS for Green Behaviour

Some tips that may help reduce your family's exposure to pesticides:

- **Scrub thoroughly:** With conventional foods we cannot avoid the presence of pesticides that are absorbed through plant roots. However, much of the residue from sprayed chemicals is blocked by the plant's skin. Therefore, vigorous washing can help remove the remnant traces of pesticide.
- **Try the wash:** A number of companies also offer non-toxic wash products, which can be sprayed on produce and rinsed.
- **To peel or not to peel?** Some experts have suggested choosing produce with thick and peelable skin which make it harder for pesticides to enter the primary flesh. However, tests have turned up residues even on peeled bananas and other fruits. Furthermore, the skins of apples, potatoes and other produce are often loaded with health-promoting antioxidants and other good nutrients. Hence the decision to peel or not can be rather tricky.
- **Grow your own:** By sowing our own garden or cultivating vegetables in containers we can control exactly what goes into our food.
- **Buy organic!** Tests have shown organic foods to have much lower levels of pesticide residue. It's still a good idea to wash organic produce.

Farewell



In September we said good-bye to Han Heijnen, who has been with WHO now for the past 11 years. With a vast repertoire of knowledge and experience, Han was an immense resource to the whole SDE team. Han spent a total of nine years in the “field” in Bangladesh and Nepal, and two years in the Regional Office. Han’s special strength was his ability to work seamlessly with both local and international staff, advocate convincingly, and keep up WHO’s visibility at the country level by demonstrating technical excellence, trust and availability. He moves now to Africa with his wife Else to begin another chapter of health and environmental service. We wish them good luck.

In September we also say good-bye to Alex von Hildebrand, who was with WHO for the past eight years. Alex was a very valuable member of the SDE team. He excelled in working with others and consistently promoted a collaborative spirit within SEARO by directly engaging other colleagues in common SDE programmes. Integrated vector management, climate change and health, and healthy wet markets are specific projects where he demonstrated his proactive attitude and relentless pursuit of interdepartmental collaboration, both in SEARO and within countries. We will miss Alex’s energy and his spirit of enthusiasm, which helped in large part to drive the SDE programme. He moves to Quito, Equador, to be WHO country advisor. We wish him and his family well in their new environment.



After 6 years as Administrative Assistant to the SDE Department, we have to finally say good-bye to Mr K. Ratnakaran. Ratna is a valuable resource to lose, but we take joy in his being in SEARO and the fact that he will always be available to tap into his many years of office administration wisdom. Ratna has always been quick, yet thorough in his many years of work and is a skilled multi-tasker who is able to keep eyes and ears on several events at the same time. Ratna will be sorely missed by the whole team; we wish him the best of luck in his new job at the RDOC sales unit at SEARO.

Welcome to the SDE Family

SDE has a new team member, Ms Rikka Rantala, another Junior Professional Officer from Finland, who will be based in the Regional Office, and handling the Health and Human Rights programme of work.

As readers may recall, Mr Samuli Seppanen, also from Finland, initiated this work at the Regional Office during 2007-2008, when he laid a sound programme foundation. Rikka will start from where Mr Samuli left, and, in addition, will of course provide her own variations and contributions that can align with what the Member countries want to pursue in the next biennium. Her email ID is rantalar@searo.who.int.



Significant events of the Quarter

- Technical Discussions on Human Health and Climate Change in WHO SEARO from 18 to 21 August 2009.
- Regional Consultation on Developing Guidelines for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion in Schools in Chiang Mai, Thailand, from 28 to 30 September 2009.

SDE Focal Points

Country Offices

Bangladesh: Dr Andrew Trevett, Environmental Health Adviser, WHO Bangladesh (trevetta@searo.who.int)

Bhutan: Thinlay Dorji, National Professional Officer, Programmes and Administration, WHO Bhutan (dorjit@searo.who.int)

DPR Korea: Dr S. Puri, Acting WHO Representative (puris@whoprk.org)

India: Mr A.K. Sengupta, NPO, Environment, WHO India (senguptaak@searo.who.int)

Indonesia: Mr Sharad Adhikary, Environmental Health Adviser, WHO Indonesia (adhikarys@who.ir.id)

Maldives: Ms Laila Ali, NPO, Programmes and Administration, WHO Maldives (laila@who.org.mv)

Myanmar: Ms Margareta Patricia Skold, Scientist (PHA), WHO Myanmar (skoldm.whomm@undp.org)

Nepal: Mr Nam Raj Khatri, National Professional Officer, WHO Nepal (khatrin@searo.who.int)

Sri Lanka: Dr H. Yakandawalah, WHO Sri Lanka (yakandawalah@whosrilanka.org)

Thailand: Dr Arun Mallik, WHO Thailand (Emergency/ Humanitarian issues) (mallik@searo.who.int), Mr Chawalit Tantinitkul (Food Safety issues), Dr Adisak Sattam (Other Environmental Health issues) (Adisak@searo.who.int)

Timor-Leste: Dr Paramita Sudharto, Acting WHO Representative (searo.who.int)

Regional Office, New Delhi, India

Dr A. Sattar Yoosuf, Director, Department of Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments (yoosufa@searo.who.int)

Ms Payden, Regional Adviser, Water and Sanitation for Health & Ag Environmental Health and Climate Change (payden@searo.who.int)

Dr Salma Burton, Regional Adviser, Occupational and Environmental Health (burtons@searo.who.int)

Mr Pak Chang Rim, Coordinator, External Coordination Unit (rimpak@searo.who.int)

Ms Maria Manuela Bromson, Technical Officer, Ag Strategic Alliance and Partnership (enwerembromsonm@searo.who.int)

Dr Roderico Ofrin, Regional Adviser, Emergency & Humanitarian Action (ofrin@searo.who.int)

Ms Anchalee Chamchuklin, Technical Information Management & Dissemination (chamchuklina@searo.who.int)

Mr Bruce F. Murphy, Reports and Documents, (murphyb@searo.who.int)

Ms Riikka Rantala, JPO, Health and Human Rights (rantalar@searo.who.int)

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This monthly newsletter is published by the Department of Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments
 WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia, New Delhi – 110 002, India, **Ph:** 91-11-23370804, **Fax:** 91-11-23370197, **Email:** sde@searo.who.int