Rational use of antibiotics is critical to fight against infectious diseases: WHO

New Delhi, 6 April 2011 – On World Health Day 2011, WHO is urging intensified global commitment to safeguard antibiotics for future generations. Growing resistance by microbes to antibiotics threatens the continued effectiveness of many medicines. WHO has therefore made antimicrobial resistance the theme of this year’s World Health Day.

We depend on antibiotics and other antimicrobial medicines to treat conditions that would otherwise be fatal. Antimicrobial resistance is drug resistance that renders these medicines ineffective. WHO is urging governments and stakeholders to implement policies and practices to prevent and counter the emergence of highly resistant microorganisms. Although antimicrobial resistance is not a new problem, it is fast becoming more dangerous.

“The time for sustained action is now, since we are slowly but surely moving towards a reversion to the dreadful pre-antibiotic era”, said Dr. Samlee Plianbangchang, WHO’s Regional Director for South-East Asia. “If that happens, death and disease due to untreatable infectious diseases will become the biggest obstacle to poverty alleviation, development, and global efforts to make the world a better and more healthy place”.

In WHO’s South-East Asia Region, inadequate quality, misuse and poor access to drugs continue to be major components of the widespread inappropriate use of antibiotics. Antimicrobial resistance also has enormous social and personal costs. When infections become resistant to first-line antibiotics treatment has to shift to second- and third-line drugs, which are nearly always much more expensive and sometimes more toxic as well. The drugs needed to treat multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) are over 100 times more expensive than the first-line drugs. In some countries the high cost is prohibitive, with the result that some of these cases can no longer be treated. Similarly, the emergence of resistance in HIV to currently effective drugs could destroy the hopes of survival for millions of people living with HIV.

Discovery, development and distribution of new antibiotics is a long, drawn out and expensive process. After investing millions of dollars and years of research, when a new antibiotic becomes available, its misuse renders it ineffective in a very short time.
Member States in South-East Asia need to take up this challenge and establish monitoring mechanisms and remedial actions at all levels. Combating antimicrobial resistance is a challenge that cannot be addressed by health administrators alone. Misuse of antibiotics by prescribers and users have behavioural, educational, ethical and economic dimensions which demand concerted and sustained actions by all sectors of society. Weak pharmaceutical regulatory mechanisms in most developing countries also permit the availability of antibiotics of questionable quality and the unauthorized sale of these antibiotics.

On 7 April, World Health Day, WHO is urging all stakeholders to promote rational use of antibiotics in the fight against infectious diseases.

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