New resolution on HIV/AIDS announced at the 53rd World Health Assembly

One of the highlights of the 53rd World Health Assembly held in Geneva from 15 to 20 May 2000 was a far-reaching resolution on HIV/AIDS. The resolution asks WHO Member States to increase access to treatments for HIV-related illnesses and urges for renewal of efforts to make drugs more available and affordable to developing countries despite recent progress in this area (see accompanying news story: *Companies reduce prices for HIV drugs in developing countries*). WHO Director-General, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, commented: “Through the enhancing of care and strengthening its linkages to prevention, we are about to give new directions and a new energy to an expanded revitalized response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.”

At the Health Assembly, the Dutch government announced that they will contribute US$ 10 million to the Polio Eradication Initiative. The lack of funding to complete the initiative stood at US$ 300 million in February 2000. For more than ten years, the eradication of poliomyelitis by the year 2000 has been a goal of WHO. However, up to 20 countries are likely to have poliovirus circulating at the end of the year 2000. Dr Brundtland stressed the need for efforts to intensify if poliomyelitis is to be eradicated and emphasized that there was no need for complacency in the final phase of the campaign: “The certification date for the global eradication of polio is 2005 and we are on track to meet that target” said Dr Brundtland.

Other contributions announced included a grant of US$ 5 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to support WHO’s collaborative efforts to eradicate dracunculiasis (guinea-worm disease). Dr Marc Karam of WHO’s Communicable Diseases Control, Prevention and Eradication Programme commented: “To date, 151 countries and territories have been certified free of dracunculiasis. For the remaining countries, certification will be granted once transmission has been interrupted and no new cases are reported in a subsequent three-year period.” He added: “The money from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation will be used in countries that report zero incidence to carry out verification surveys during the three-year period by international certification teams, to support surveillance and, ultimately, to prepare the certification files for review by the International Commission for the Certification of Dracunculiasis Eradication.” Funds will also be used for coordination of global eradication activities.

The ethical problems of genetics, biotechnology and related issues and their impact on public health were also considered at the Health Assembly. Representatives of WHO Member States repeatedly stressed the need to address bioethical issues in these areas on a larger scale. Abdallah Daar, Professor of Surgery at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, has been instrumental in preparing position papers for WHO on human cloning and other ethical issues. He noted: “Now that WHO has recognized the need to address the broader ethical issues, it needs to build on the excellent foundational work that has already been done. Because of the complexity of the issues, WHO should identify and form an external bioethics advisory group to provide advice on these important and complex issues ... Expert panels could deal with individual issues on the advice of the advisory group.” In an area where ethical considerations are repeatedly outpaced by technological developments, addressing these issues may prove to be a good test of the skills of the Organization.

Barry Whyte, *Bulletin*