**WHO News**

**Water and health, hand-in-hand for a day**

To raise awareness of the connection between water and health, WHO was chosen as lead agency for World Water Day on 22 March. Scores of events, ranging from Internet-based discussions among students to ice-hockey games, music video releases, and the more traditional seminars and awards, took place in countries around the world. World Water Day has been celebrated annually since it was first conceived at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. This is the first year that WHO has acted as primary sponsor.

“Access to safe water is a universal need ... and a basic human right,” WHO director-general, Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, said in a video released on the World Water Day website (www.worldwaterday.org). More than one billion people — 18% of the world’s population — do not have access to “improved sources” of water and 2.4 billion do not have access to basic sanitation, she noted. Consequently, more than 3 million people die each year from water-related diseases such as diarrhoea and malaria. Millions of others suffer from diseases such as dysentery, which can be transmitted by contaminated water, and trachoma, which is associated with lack of readily accessible water.

A lack of clean water is often linked to poverty. “The absence of a safe water supply contributes to an estimated 80% of disease and death in the developing world,” said UN secretary-general Kofi Annan. “Clean water is a luxury that remains out of the reach of many.”

A WHO report, *Water for Health — Taking Charge*, released on World Water Day, recommends several low-tech methods for improving water supplies and health in developing countries. “Business as usual is no longer an option,” Brundtland wrote in the report’s foreword. “We don’t have enough time to just wait for large infrastructure investments to provide these basic services. Several simple interventions are available.”

The report recommends chlorination, both in communities and for individual households. In one island country, Maldives, where chlorination was used in wells and rainwater collection tanks, deaths from diarrhoea were eliminated, according to the report. Another recommendation is for use of solar water disinfection, or SODIS, whereby water in plastic bottles is disinfected by exposure to the sun for at least 2 hours. A third recommendation is a change in behaviour. Handwashing with soap, for example, can dramatically lower rates of disease.

Catherine Dold, Boulder, Colorado, USA

**A day in the life of the world’s anti-TB drive**

In March, WHO and the Stop TB partnership launched a US$ 50 million-a-year initiative to provide free drugs to 10 million tuberculosis patients over the next five years. By 2010, the Global TB Drug Facility, as the initiative is called, aims to reach 45 million patients in the worst-affected countries. By 2020, it hopes to have prevented 25 million TB deaths and 50 million cases.

The new drug facility was launched in the run-up to World TB Day, 24 March, which this year focused on tuberculosis as a human rights issue. In announcing the new facility, WHO director-general Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland said access to treatment and cure was basic to human rights. “It is shameful that TB patients are still dying of the disease, and inexcusable that less than a quarter of them have access to effective treatment.”

In its annual report on global tuberculosis control, also issued in the run-up to World TB Day, WHO estimates that 8.4 million people contracted TB in 1999 — up from 8 million in 1997. The biggest increase in cases since 1997 was in sub-Saharan Africa, which experienced a 20% surge in cases due to the high rates of people co-infected with HIV and TB. About two

**A sampling of World TB Day events**

This year’s World TB Day falls on 24 March. It was marked by a series of national and international events coordinated by the partners of the Stop TB partnership.

- 16 March, Cape Town, South Africa: Archbishop Desmond Tutu launches World TB Day with the publication of a new report by the Stop TB partnership: *A human rights approach to tuberculosis*.
- 20 March, New York, USA: the medical relief agency Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) holds a panel discussion, chaired by Pulitzer prize-winning author Laurie Garrett, on *Defusing the time bomb: the world’s TB crisis*.
- 21 March, Washington DC, USA: the US National Council for the Elimination of TB and the Stop TB partnership launch the Global TB Drug Facility (see main text) and outline plans to introduce a new bill in the US Congress — the Omnibus Tuberculosis Control Bill 2001 — designed to boost US funding for national and global TB control activities.
- 23 March, Brussels, Belgium: the Global Alliance for TB Drug Development releases early research findings from a new study — *The pharmaco-economics of TB drug development* — which demonstrate the large market potential for a new TB drug that could reduce the treatment period from six to two months.
- 23 March, Moscow, Russian Federation: MSF holds a *Contagious concert*, in which young musicians perform works by composers who suffered from tuberculosis — including Chopin, Liszt, Shostakovich, and Stravinsky.
million people die from TB every year, half a million with concurrent HIV infection. Although TB is curable, only 23% of people with active TB have access to DOTS, formerly an acronym for “directly observed treatment short-course”, but now a “brand name” for a broader anti-TB package.

Unless the current trend can be reversed, says WHO, there will be 10.2 million new TB cases a year by 2005. And the goal of detecting 70% of cases through DOTS and curing 85% of them will not be reached until 2013 — eight years later than the global target set at a ministerial conference held in Amsterdam in March 2000. And that’s not to mention multidrug-resistant TB, which is on the increase in many places, particularly in the former Soviet Union, where it has been encountered in up to 14% of new TB cases.

The Global TB Drug Facility was launched in Washington DC on 21 March, with an initial US$ 10 million from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The first grants have now been approved to provide drugs to treat almost 200 000 patients in Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe.

Dr Jacob Kumaresan, executive secretary of the WHO-based Stop TB partnership, told the Bulletin: “The drugs used to treat TB have been available for over three decades, and the 6–8 month course of treatment for TB costs as little as US$ 10–15. But shortages of TB drugs are frequent and serious, often caused by financial constraints, inefficient drug procurement systems, and poor management. With the TB Drug Facility we will be able to ensure an uninterrupted supply of high-quality drugs, which should help to expand rapidly the use of DOTS.”

Meanwhile, sympathisers of the anti-TB movement have taken advantage of World TB Day to give material expression to their support: the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation announced a gift of US$ 10 million to the WHO-based tropical disease research programme (TDR) to fund the development of better diagnostic tests for TB, and the Dutch government offered 20 million Dutch Guilders (about US$ 8 million) to the Stop TB partnership.

Sheila Davey, Geneva, Switzerland

### Winning drawing of WHO’s mental health contest

This drawing is how Dhruva Suri, a 7-year-old boy from New Delhi, India, responded to WHO’s call for a picture of how a child with a brain disorder might experience his or her “difference”. On 7 April, Suri was declared winner of WHO’s global school contest in the 6–9-year-old category by an international jury. More than 70 countries and thousands of children took part in the contest, which was organized as part of World Health Day (7 April) celebrations, devoted this year to mental health. The contest aimed, said Dr Benedetto Saraceno, head of WHO’s mental health programme, “to draw young people into the debate on how we can make good mental health a reality for everybody”. An essay competition, on a mental health topic, was organized for older children. The winners were two girls, Tang Shu-wei, 14, of China, for the 10–14-year-old category, and Bibbie Kumangai, 17, of Palau, for the 15–18-year-old category.