

## Polio virus pops up in unexpected places

On three occasions since June last year the polio virus has made impromptu appearances that have given the international health community food for thought.

First, in June it was found in tap water in the eastern French town of Strasbourg. On the strength of preliminary analysis, WHO believes that this virus came from an old vaccine strain that possibly escaped from a laboratory. "This event underlines the need for all laboratories to begin implementing WHO's plan for worldwide containment of laboratory poliovirus," commented Bruce Aylward, who heads WHO's polio eradication team.

Then in July, the virus appeared in the Dominican Republic and Haiti, where it had by 22 December caused 8 confirmed cases of polio, with two deaths. The responsible virus was identified as originating from an oral polio vaccine virus that had "reverted" to a virulent form and spread in an incompletely vaccinated community. This is the first outbreak of polio in the Americas since the disease was certified in 1994 as eradicated from the region. "The outbreak is being properly investigated and controlled and should not affect the certification," Dr Aylward said.

Finally, in August, an outbreak of polio occurred in the West African island of Cape Verde, and had caused 44 cases by 22 December. On the strength of molecular analysis, WHO officials believe this outbreak was caused by a wild poliovirus, probably imported from Angola, where transmission of the infection is still occurring.

These two outbreaks, Dr Aylward said, "tell us first that we will eventually *have* to stop immunization with the oral polio vaccine once polio has been globally certified as eradicated and that we will have to do so in a globally coordinated manner so that no country remains vulnerable. Until that time, high oral polio vaccine coverage must be maintained." Dr Aylward added: "They also tell us that the vaccine virus and not just wild poliovirus will have to be rigorously contained after eradication and that thorough polio surveillance will have to continue for quite a number of years not only after eradication but also after the cessation of immunization." ■

John Maurice, *Bulletin*

## Internet initiative to boost health research in Africa, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe

In December WHO launched an initiative aimed at bridging the information technology gap. This "digital divide", as UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has called it, currently handicaps health researchers in low-income countries. The aim is twofold: to provide access for researchers in developing countries to cutting-edge scientific information via the Internet — often out of their reach for technical and cost reasons — and to enable health researchers from developing countries and emerging economies to network with scientific colleagues from around the world.

Overall, the initiative should give a much-needed boost to research into diseases that disproportionately affect the poor — a neglected area which attracts less than 10% of global funds for health research.

Barbara Aronson of WHO's Library and Information Networks for Knowledge, who helped broker the public-private research initiative, says it will help put researchers from developing countries and emerging economies on the map at last. "This will ensure that their voices are heard and that research in these countries will get the attention and recognition it deserves both locally and internationally."

A 6–12-months pilot project of the initiative will begin in early 2001 at nine health research institutes specializing in tropical diseases, reproductive health, and communicable and noncommunicable diseases in Africa (Ghana, Mali, Mozambique, the United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda), Central Asia (Mongolia), and Eastern Europe (Armenia, Uzbekistan).

The pilot project marks the operational launch of a wider United Nations programme, Health InterNetwork, established early last year to improve global public health by increasing the flow of health information worldwide via the Internet. The Health InterNetwork, spearheaded by WHO, aims to create a public health portal on the Internet and establish new information sites in developing countries and emerging economies by the end of 2003. The Health InterNetwork partners — the Open Society Institute of the Soros Foundation network, leading information service providers including Elsevier Science, ISI®, and SilverPlatter, other UN agencies, and a range of public and private sector partners — will

provide computer technology, training, and logistic support tailored to meet the differing needs of researchers, policy-makers, and health care providers in the different countries. By 2002, about 30–40 countries are expected to be participating.

Other pilot projects in the pipeline include a programme for nurse training in Africa and a project to improve the flow of information and communication at all levels within India's health system.

The health research initiative will establish high-speed Internet connectivity, provide top-quality scientific information online, and train researchers in information management so they can exploit these services to the full. The three information service providers involved have each agreed to make a one-year donation of their subscription-only online services to the participating research institutes. If the pilot projects are successful, WHO will then negotiate a price for continued services on a country-by-country basis. WHO anticipates that donor support of US\$ 40–50 million will be needed over the first five years for the 30–40 countries involved.

In a separate development, Brazil and China have each made bilateral agreements outside the Health InterNetwork with Elsevier Science, ISI®, and SilverPlatter to provide health research information online.

Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland, WHO Director-General, said: "If the researchers and scientists can read the same journals, search the same databases, join in the discussion groups, compete for the same grants as their colleagues from wealthier countries, it will strengthen their own research, bring them into the international community of researchers and eventually improve dissemination of their own results." ■

Sheila Davey, *Geneva*

## Taking avoidable danger out of pregnancy

Last October, in an attempt to make a dent in the huge, persistent toll of maternal deaths and disease, WHO launched a campaign to urge country health authorities to tackle the heavy toll of unsafe pregnancies. Of the 210 million women who become pregnant each year, about 20 million become ill and more than half a million die from causes