

A Global Epidemic of Chronic Disease

A new report forecasts that deaths from chronic diseases in the Western Pacific Region will increase by 20% over the next 10 years

released by the World Health Organization

In a new report released on October 5, 2005, the World Health Organization (WHO) says determined global action to prevent chronic disease could save the lives of 36 million people who would otherwise die by 2015.

Chronic diseases are by far the leading cause of death in the world and their impact is steadily growing. The report, *Preventing Chronic Diseases: A Vital Investment*, projects that approximately 17 million people die prematurely each year as a result of the global epidemic of chronic disease.

Faced with the prospect of millions of people dying prematurely and suffering needlessly from heart disease, stroke, cancer and diabetes, WHO says this global epidemic must be stopped.

Chronic diseases are identified as cardiovascular diseases (mainly heart disease and stroke), cancer, chronic respiratory diseases, diabetes and a number of other conditions, including mental disorders, bone and joint disorders, and genetic problems. Contrary to common perception, this largely invisible epidemic takes its greatest toll in low- and middle-income countries, where 80% of all chronic disease deaths occur.

The report provides new projections for the economic impact of chronic diseases. For example, the estimated accumulated loss to China from 2005 to 2015 due to chronic diseases is US\$ 558 billion. India's loss for the same period is estimated at US\$ 236 billion.

"Whether measured in terms of human suffering or in terms of economic impact, this situation is not acceptable," said Dr Shigeru Omi, WHO regional director for the Western Pacific. "We are urging countries to take the actions we know will reduce premature death from chronic diseases."

THE GLOBAL GOAL

In the report, WHO proposes a new global goal: to reduce the projected trend of chronic disease death rates by 2% each year until 2015. This would prevent 36 million people dying of chronic diseases in the next 10 years, nearly half of them before they turn 70.

But these problems and their solutions lie outside the control of any one sector. In order to achieve the goal, all sectors, from government to private enterprises, civil society and communities, will have to work together. "This has to be a joint effort," said Omi. "We know what to do, and we must do it now."

PREVENTABLE RISK FACTORS

The vast majority of cases of chronic diseases are caused by a small number of known and preventable risk factors. Three of the most important are unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and tobacco use. Globally, these risk factors are increasing as people's dietary habits change to foods high in fats and sugars, and people's work and living situations are much less physically active. Increased marketing and sales of tobacco products in low- and middle-income countries mean greater exposure to the risk of tobacco.

One billion people globally are overweight or obese, and WHO predicts that will rise beyond 1.5 billion by 2015 without immediate action.

The report examines the vast evidence-based knowledge about inexpensive and cost-effective measures that can produce rapid health gains and for which the benefits far outweigh the costs. Examples include salt reduction in processed foods, improved school meals and the taxation of tobacco products, which is not only cost-effective but also raises revenues for governments.

UW-Madison Global Health Certificate: An Opportunity to Develop Expertise in Global Pharmacy

by Lori DiPrete Brown, MSPH, Assistant Director, Center for Global Health, UW Medical School

The UW-Madison Center for Global Health is pleased to announce the Certificate in Global Health. This certificate is a collaborative offering of UW faculty from the schools of medicine and public health, nursing, pharmacy, veterinary medicine and international studies. The certificate curriculum focuses on global health topics and health issues that transcend national boundaries, emphasizing health and disease in developing countries.

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GLOBAL VOICES IN SUPPORT

"We can measure the loss of income to the Chinese economy alone at a staggering US \$550 billion over the next 10 years. In response to these facts, the Ministry of Health of China, with the support of WHO, has been developing the first medium- and long-term high level national plan for chronic disease prevention and control."

— Wang Longde, Vice-Minister of Health, the People's Republic of China

"We cannot afford to say 'we must tackle other diseases first – HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis – then we will deal with chronic diseases'. If we wait even

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A DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE CERTIFICATE AND AN APPLICATION FORM ARE AVAILABLE AT WWW.POPHEALTH.WISC.EDU/GH.

10 years, we will find that the problem is even larger and more expensive to address.”

– **Olusegun Obasanjo,**
President of Nigeria

“Although chronic diseases are among the most common and costly health problems, they are also among the most preventable. Public health efforts on health promotion and disease prevention are critical to achieving better health outcomes for people worldwide.”

– **Ujjal Dosanjh,**
Minister of Health, Canada

The report *Preventing Chronic Diseases: a Vital Investment* is available in pdf format at: www.who.int/chp/chronic_disease_report/media/

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