

A helmet for cyclists

In the United States of America head injuries account for more than two-thirds of all cycling fatalities, children between ages six and 14 being at highest risks. Wearing a protective helmet reduces injury to the head and the brain by 75%. WHO's specialists strongly advise taking this preventive measure, the importance of which is not yet fully understood. Australia is today the only country in the world where cyclists are obliged to wear helmets. The reluctance shown by some cyclists is difficult to understand, taking into account that no one denies anymore that motorcyclists are efficiently protected by helmets.

Falls, drownings and poisoning

Not all accidents occur on the road. Injuries also happen at home, at work, or at play. Here again alcohol consumption plays an important role, because the imbibers are more likely to hurt themselves by falls or by burns, more likely to overdose medicines, more likely to drown, for example. While in the developed world, trends show drinking levelling out or even decreasing in the developing world, trends are on the upswing – jumping over recent decades by at least 500% in Asia, 400% in Africa and 200% in Latin America.

According to WHO statistics, Seychelles and Bahamas are the countries with the highest mortality from drowning, and Hungary ranks first in accidental falls.

Most cases of poisoning are unintentional and most poison victims are children. A study carried out in the United Kingdom shows that of 1000 infants up to age five treated for poisoning, 55% had ingested medicines, while 37% had swallowed household or garden chemicals. The situation is different in developing countries where chemical

products such as pesticides account for most of the cases. A recent study in Sri Lanka showed that 50% of reported poisoning cases were caused by pesticides and only 16.7% by medicaments.

According to the latest statistics available in WHO, the former USSR, Finland and Poland are at the top of the list for accidental poisoning among males. As far as women are concerned, the Republic of Korea ranks first followed by the former USSR and Romania.

Murders and suicides

As for intentional deaths, about 200 000 suicides and 60 000 murders are reported every year in developed countries, compared with 550 000 suicides and 215 000 murders in the developing world. According to the latest statistics, Hungary has the highest rates for suicides with 48.4 per 100 000 males and 14.6 per 100 000 females.

Lost years of life

The years of life lost before age 65 is a striking measure of the impact of injuries and accidents which are responsible for the fact that hundreds of thousands of inhabitants of our planet, most of them young, die every year in good health. In the USA only, heart diseases and cancer account for 3.8 million years of life lost while injuries for 4.1 million years. Yet more is spent on heart and cancer research than on injury.

At a time when economic crises are jeopardizing efforts to improve the health of mankind, injuries of all kinds cost the world community almost US\$ 500 thousand million a year in medical care and lost productivity.

World Health Organization, Geneva

WHO declares tuberculosis a global emergency

The World Health Organization today took the extraordinary step of declaring tuberculosis a global emergency, warning that the disease will claim over 30 million lives in the next decade unless immediate action is taken to curb its spread. Tuberculosis is the leading cause of death from a single infectious agent, a bacterium that already infects one third of the world's population. Every year, eight million people are developing the disease.

„Tuberculosis is humanity's greatest killer and it is out of control in many parts of the world. The disease, preventable and treatable, has been

grossly neglected and no country is immune to it“, Dr Arati Kochi, Manager of the WHO Tuberculosis Programme said today.

„Modern transportation, increasing global business travel and migration, and refugees from wars and famines will ensure that TB continues to spread in the industrialized as well as the developing world“, Dr Kochi said. He was speaking at the start of a two-day meeting in London of the Co-ordination, Advisory and Review Group (CARG) of the WHO Tuberculosis Programme, which is hammering out details of the rapid measures needed to control the disease.

The deadly link between TB and HIV, the human immunodeficiency virus that leads to AIDS, is another major factor in its spread and a further cause for deep concern among WHO experts. In 1990, an estimated 3,5 million people in sub-Saharan Africa were dually infected with HIV and TB, and consequently have a 25-fold increased risk of developing a potentially fatal case of tuberculosis, according to researchers. In Asia, more than 1,000 million people are already infected with TB and more than one million are HIV-positive. During the 1990s, and extra seven million cases of tuberculosis are predicted because of dual HIV/TB infection.

Tuberculosis is an infectious disease transmitted by bacteria spread into the air by a patient with active pulmonary tuberculosis – an infection of the chest – such as by coughing or sneezing. Once a person is infected, he or she risks developing active TB, and that risk persists throughout life. However, the majority of those infected show no symptoms, and are not infectious.

The number of TB cases in Europe and North America has risen dramatically in the past five years. The United States reported a 12 per cent increase during 1986–1991, Italy reported a 28 per cent rise during 1988–1990, and Switzerland saw a 33 per cent rise from 1986–1990. However, the great majority of today's cases, and more than 95 per cent of TB deaths, are in the developing world.

WHO is warning that tuberculosis cannot be completely controlled in the industrialized world until it is sharply reduced as a health threat in developing nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

One quarter of all TB cases in the United States are among foreign-born persons, and increasing travel and immigration from such countries adds to the spread of the disease.

The WHO Tuberculosis Programme calculates that it needs about US\$ 20 million over the next two years to help lay the foundations for effective national control programmes in worst-affected countries. Once that preparatory work is underway, about US\$ 80 million to 100 million more

needs to be provided annually to countries to enable them to implement effective control programmes.

According to WHO experts, the resurgence of tuberculosis is due to four main factors:

- Public policy neglect has allowed TB control programmes systems to deteriorate or even disappear in many parts of the world during the last 20 years or so.
- The devastating link between TB and HIV is causing an explosion of tuberculosis cases. There is clear evidence that HIV infection activates tuberculosis in people with previously inactive TB, by weakening their natural defences, and that TB may speed the progression to AIDS in HIV patients.
- Demographic forces are at work. Children born in the last few decades in regions with high population growth rates are now reaching the ages where mortality from tuberculosis is high.
- Poorly managed and incorrectly conceptualized TB control programmes have contributed to the emergence of dangerous drug-resistant strains of tuberculosis bacteria.

Tuberculosis is curable, and treatment is inexpensive. But successful treatment requires six to months of consistent, uninterrupted medication. New, drug-resistant strains of the bacteria are developing because patients are not completing the treatment. These strains are more dangerous to the individual and the community because they are substantially more difficult and expensive to treat.

The best way to prevent TB is to cure infectious cases in their early stages in order to prevent transmission to others. Control programmes that treat infectious patients but do not ensure that they are cured risk doing more harm than good. Patients who have incomplete treatment can develop – and spread – drug-resistant TB.

World Health Organization, Geneva