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WHO Backgrounder/5
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745 000 CHILDREN DIE OF MEASLES EACH YEAR, BUT ALL DEATHS ARE PREVENTABLE THROUGH A NOVEL, COMPREHENSIVE IMMUNIZATION STRATEGY

745 000 Children Die of Measles Each Year, but all Measles Deaths are Preventable Using a Comprehensive Immunization Strategy

PROBLEM: Despite the availability of a safe, highly effective and inexpensive vaccine, measles affects over 30 million children and claims the lives of almost 750 000 each year – more than half of them in Africa. Of all the vaccine-preventable diseases, measles remains the leading killer of children.

SOLUTION: The strategy for measles mortality reduction recommended by WHO/UNICEF provides children with two opportunities for measles immunization. The first opportunity is given at nine months of age through the country's routine immunization delivery system, and a second opportunity is provided through supplementary immunization activities conducted every three to four years to ensure that every child is protected.

The comprehensive strategy has been extremely effective in a block of seven southern African countries. Through its full implementation, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe have reduced measles deaths to very low levels since the year 2000.

If implemented correctly, the strategy could prevent a further 2.3 million child deaths in Africa over the next 10 years, markedly reducing the death toll from measles on the continent.

GLOBAL COMMITMENTS TO MEASLES REDUCTION: There are two global goals related to measles mortality reduction. The 2000 UN Millennium Development Goals include a target to reduce the under-five mortality by two thirds by 2010. And the 2002 UN General Assembly Special Session on Children (UNGASS) established a resolution to reduce measles deaths by 50% by the year 2005 compared to 1999 levels.

This year, a resolution to the World Health Assembly, on 24 May, will ask countries to contribute actively to the achievement of the UNGASS and Millennium Development targets without further delay.

FUNDING NEEDS: WHO and UNICEF currently estimate that an additional US\$ 200 million will be required to implement the comprehensive measles strategy over the next three years in the 45 priority countries that account for about 95% of global measles deaths. The funds would pay for the vaccines, safe injection materials, refrigeration equipment, transportation and personnel both to strengthen routine immunization systems and to conduct the supplementary measles immunization activities.

A dose of measles vaccine costs only US\$ 0.25, including safe injection equipment. Of all health interventions, measles immunization carries one of the highest health returns for the money spent.

For further information, please contact the Communications Office of the Director-General's Office, WHO Geneva, Tel (+41 22) 791 2222, Fax (+41 22) 791 4858; e-mail inf@who.int . All WHO Press Releases, Fact Sheets and Features can be obtained on Internet on the WHO home page <http://www.who.int>.