Myanmar develops national drug policy

Health Minister opens landmark Yangon meeting

OPENING Myanmar’s first National Drug Policy Meeting, Minister of Health, Dr U Pe Thein, spoke of constraints such as drug shortages, a weak distribution system and irrational use. It is the rural areas, he stressed, that face the greatest shortages. With the help of WHO, developing countries are now being assisted in the development and promotion of drug policies, appropriate selection and procurement, and the rational use of drugs. The positive results of this work had led to the Government’s decision to follow the WHO guidelines and develop a drug policy relevant to the country’s needs, within the context of the Myanmar Essential Drugs Programme.

The Minister emphasized that the availability and use of medicinal drugs necessitated the active involvement of many authorities in addition to the Ministry of Health. Departments such as Trade, Planning and Finance, Industry, Labour, Cooperatives, Home and Religious Affairs, all had an important role to play and would need to cooperate closely in fulfilling their responsibilities for such activities as importation, production, finance, purchase, distribution and regulation.

Frank and comprehensive discussions

Over 60 participants from a wide professional spectrum encompassing doctors, pharmacists, economists, nurses, pharmaceutical manufacturers, health educators, planners, administrators, and legal experts engaged in a frank and comprehensive dialogue from 10-15 July 1989. Changes that would result from the country’s newly announced “open door” policy of free market development stimulated particularly lively discussion. While other major focuses of debate ranged from problems of pharmaceutical supply, management and use within the national and international context, areas of collaboration, to priority action for improving drug availability. The meeting alternated plenary with working group sessions, so that both an exchange of views on broad areas of concern and detailed technical discussions could take place. Representatives from WHO’s Action Programme and the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia also participated as resource persons and working group facilitators.

Outcomes

The meeting had two principal outcomes:

- a draft national drug policy document covering, inter alia, drug legislation, quality assurance, the supply system, production, rational use, information and marketing, traditional medicine, training, research, allocation of financial resources, monitoring and evaluation, and technical cooperation between countries. This draft policy document has been formally submitted to the Government and is presently under review;
- two, recommendations, addressed to the Government, on priority action which called for:

  Improving supply...
  The constitution of an interministerial committee to suggest immediate measures to improve the supply of medicines;

  Retail outlet registration...
  The registration of all retail shops selling medicinal products, with the sale of drugs preferably by pharmacists;

  Drug registration...
  The importation, or local manufacture, only of drugs which are registered;

  Regulatory control...
  A committee to study the regulatory control of medicinal products of local and foreign manufacture, the establishment of a Drug Regulatory Authority, and the improvement of quality control;

  Pharmacy training...
  A review and appropriate modification of pharmacy training in view of the expanded role of pharmacists in the management of the pharmaceutical supply system, quality assurance, production and drug information;

  Rational use...
  A review and modification of training of medical and paramedical personnel to incorporate the essential drugs concept and promote the rational use of drugs;

  Local production...
  Fiscal incentives to promote local production, the modernization of technology for the local manufacture of essential drugs, and the introduction of WHO’s good manufacturing practices (GMP);

  Legal enforcement...
  The strict enforcement of existing legislation and regulations relating to the manufacture, sale and promotion of pharmaceutical products.

A rare opportunity...

The meeting had been a great success, concluded participants at the end of the week. The adoption of a national drug policy would represent a major step towards a better and safer drug supply; while they themselves had benefited from a rare opportunity to examine a broad range of pharmaceutical issues within an interdisciplinary context.

* In 1989 the Union of Burma changed its name to Myanmar