

Role of the health sector in the sound management of chemicals

Report by the Secretariat

1. Worldwide, the production and use of chemicals continue to grow. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development estimates that annual global sales of products from the chemicals sector doubled between 2000 and 2009 and will increase six-fold between 2010 and 2050, with a continued shift of production from member countries of that Organisation to other countries.

2. About 25% of the global burden of disease in humans is thought to be linked to environmental factors, including exposures to chemicals. Worldwide, lead exposure, for example, is estimated to account for 143 000 deaths per year, with the highest burden in developing regions. Childhood exposure to lead is estimated to contribute to about 600 000 new cases of children developing intellectual disabilities every year. Some 9% of the global disease burden due to lung cancer is attributed to occupational exposure to chemicals. Unintentional poisonings killed an estimated 193 000 people in 2012, 85% in developing countries where such poisonings are strongly associated with excessive exposure to, and inappropriate use of, toxic chemicals, including pesticides. It is estimated that in about 30% of global suicides victims poison themselves with pesticide, most cases occurring in rural agricultural areas in low- and middle-income countries. Information on disease burden, however, is only available for a very small number of chemical exposures and people are exposed to many more chemicals in their daily lives. A growing body of evidence indicates that exposures before birth, and even in the previous generation, may lead to disease later in life. The real burden of disease, and the associated demands on health systems, is unknown but likely to be much greater than estimated.

3. Many countries still lack the necessary regulatory and policy frameworks and institutional capacities to assess and prevent the negative health impacts of chemicals. For example, despite lead in paint being a significant cause of childhood poisoning, only 59 countries are known to have regulated lead-based paint. In addition, more than half WHO's Member States do not have a poisons information centre, with particular gaps in the African and Eastern Mediterranean regions and in the small island States in the Western Pacific Region.

4. In adopting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, governments recognized the importance of sound management of chemicals for the protection of human health. This is recognized in target 3.9 "by 2030, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination", target 6.3 "by 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimizing release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally", and target 12.4 "by 2020, achieve the environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle, in accordance with agreed international

frameworks, and significantly reduce their release to air, water and soil in order to minimize their adverse impacts on human health and the environment”.

THE ROLE OF HEALTH MINISTRIES

5. As sound management of chemicals is a health issue and brings substantial health benefits, engagement of the health sector is crucial in order to identify risks and to work with other sectors, as necessary, to identify and implement effective interventions. In 2006, the Health Assembly adopted resolution WHA59.15, urging Member States to take full account of the health aspects of chemical safety in national implementation of the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management and to participate in national, regional and international efforts to that end.¹ Subsequently, a strategy for strengthening the engagement of the health sector in the implementation of the Strategic Approach was adopted by the International Conference on Chemicals Management at its third session (Nairobi, 17–21 September 2012).² The strategy sets out various actions.³

6. The Strategic Approach and the Health Assembly’s resolution WHA59.15 were adopted, however, almost a decade ago. The Sixty-seventh World Health Assembly in 2014, having considered the Secretariat’s report on “Public health impacts of exposure to mercury and mercury compounds: the role of WHO and ministries of public health in the implementation of the Minamata Convention”,⁴ accepted the Secretariat’s proposal to consult Member States on priority actions on chemicals. The Secretariat accordingly held an online consultation with health-sector stakeholders in the sound management of chemicals and prepared a set of updated priority actions for the health sector to undertake in order to reach the goal of the sound management of chemicals by 2020.⁵ Responses were received from 45 governmental stakeholders and 17 other stakeholders from 51 Member States, and were supplemented by input from various regional WHO consultations and reports. The results and the health-sector priority actions were presented to the International Conference on Chemicals Management at its fourth session (Geneva, 28 September – 2 October 2015).⁶ In summary the priority actions are as follows:

- devising better and standardized methods to determine impacts of chemicals on health, to set priorities for action and to evaluate the effectiveness of policies and progress of the Strategic Approach;

¹ World Health Assembly, resolution WHA59.15, Collaboration within the United Nations system and with other intergovernmental organization, including the United Nations reform process; Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management, adopted 27 May 2006 (http://www.who.int/ipcs/publications/wha/saicm_resolution.pdf, accessed 23 November 2015).

² Resolution ICCM III/4 in document SAICM/ICCM.3/24 (Annex I).

³ Document SAICM/ICCM.3/24, Annex V.

⁴ Document A67/24 and resolution WHA67.11.

⁵ The 2020 goal is articulated in paragraph 23 of the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, adopted in resolution 2 by the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 August – 4 September 2002) (http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/131302_wssd_report_reissued.pdf, accessed 23 November 2015).

⁶ Priorities of the health sector towards achievement of the 2020 goal of sound chemicals management – Results of WHO consultation, document SAICM/ICCM.4/INF/11.

- formulating strategies aimed at prevention of ill-health and disease caused throughout the life course by chemicals, including strategies directed specifically at the health of children and workers;
- building capabilities of countries to deal with poisonings and chemical incidents and emergencies, and to achieve the core capacities for chemicals under the International Health Regulations (2005);
- promoting alternatives to highly toxic and persistent chemicals;
- filling gaps in scientific knowledge on chemicals;
- elaborating globally-harmonized methods for chemical risk assessment, to enhance transparency and understanding, enable work-sharing and reduce duplication of effort;
- improving ability to access, interpret and apply scientific knowledge, particularly in developing countries.

7. The objective of sound management of chemicals is not however the responsibility of the health sector alone. Besides the benefits of health-sector action, substantial improvements in health could result from cooperation with other sectors such as environment and agriculture, through a “health in all chemical policies” approach.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

8. The International Conference on Chemicals Management at its fourth session endorsed the overall orientation and guidance for achieving the 2020 goal¹ as a voluntary tool that will assist in the prioritization of efforts for the sound management of chemicals as a contribution to the overall implementation of the Strategic Approach. The Conference urged all stakeholders to take concerted steps to implement the overall orientation and guidance, including 11 basic elements identified therein as critical at the national and regional levels to the attainment of sound chemicals and waste management. The 11 basic elements are:

- Legal frameworks that address the life cycle of chemicals and waste;
- Relevant enforcement and compliance mechanisms;
- Implementation of chemicals and waste-related multilateral environmental agreements, as well as health, labour and other relevant conventions and voluntary mechanisms;
- Strong institutional frameworks and coordination mechanisms among relevant stakeholders;
- Collection, and systems for the transparent sharing of, relevant data and information among all relevant stakeholders using a life cycle approach, such as the implementation of the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals;

¹ Document SAICM/ICCM.4/6, Annex (link from the following page: http://www.saicm.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=525&Itemid=700, accessed 23 November 2015).

- Industry participation and defined responsibility across the life cycle, including cost recovery policies and systems as well as the incorporation of sound chemicals management into corporate policies and practices;
- Inclusion of the sound management of chemicals and waste in national health, labour, social, environment and economic budgeting processes and development plans;
- Chemicals risk assessment and risk reduction through the use of best practices;
- Strengthened capacity to deal with chemicals accidents, including institutional-strengthening for poison centres;
- Monitoring and assessing the impacts of chemicals on health and the environment;
- Development and promotion of environmentally sound and safer alternatives.

9. The updated health-sector priority actions correlate well with, and will act to support, the 11 basic elements of the guidance. Member States may want to identify and plan future activities to support the identified health sector priority actions for the sound management of chemicals and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal targets on chemicals.

10. Examples of already-identified interventions that can enable Member States to improve public health relatively quickly, include eliminating the poisoning of children with lead from lead paint, and working with the agriculture sector to control the use of highly hazardous pesticides by implementing the International Code of Conduct on Pesticide Management issued by FAO and WHO in 2014.¹ Member States are invited to participate in the WHO Chemical Risk Assessment Network,² which was established in mid-2013 to provide a forum for scientific and technical exchange, to facilitate and contribute to capacity building, and to assist in the identification of emerging risks to human health from chemicals.

11. The Strategic Approach concludes in 2020, with the fifth session of the International Conference. The International Conference at its fourth session decided to initiate an intersessional process to prepare recommendations on the Strategic Approach and the sound management of chemicals and waste beyond 2020. The health sector contributes significantly to the sound management of chemicals, but its participation in the processes of the Strategic Approach, for example the International Conference, has been low in comparison to that of the environment sector. Health ministries are urged to participate in the intersessional process in order to ensure that the recommendations for the future meet their needs.

ACTION BY THE EXECUTIVE BOARD

12. The Board is invited to note the report.

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¹ http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/agphome/documents/Pests_Pesticides/Code/CODE_2014Sep_ENG.pdf, accessed 23 November 2015.

² <http://www.who.int/ipcs/network/en/> (accessed 23 November 2015).