Scarcity and Surplus in Pain-Killers

Millions of cancer patients suffer needlessly for want of pain-relieving drugs. Yet there are surpluses of the raw material derived from the poppy plant from which pain killers are manufactured. These surpluses are stocked mainly in India and in Turkey, the world's traditional suppliers of opium for therapeutic purposes, and are intended for use in the manufacture of codeine and morphine. They have accumulated since the mid-1950s because of a lack of demand.

A major reason for excess stocks, according to Dr Jan Stjernsward, chief of WHO's cancer control programme, is the legislation in many countries that limit the availability of pain killers.

"When there is scarcity on the one hand, and surfeit on the other, the result is suffer ing," he told participants at the recent 2nd International Congress on Cancer Pain, held in Rye, New York.

According to a recent report he cites from the International Narcotics Control Board, Vienna: "The stock of India and Turkey alone would meet the global needs for nearly two years." Figures show 136 tons in morphine equivalent stocked in Turkey and 227 tons in India at the end of 1986.

"With the drugs, we can prevent pain, provide relief to cancer patients, and allow incurable patients to die with dignity," the WHO official said. "Yet over 3.5 million patients suffer pain daily throughout the world—needlessly."

Admitting that much needs to be done, Stjernsward none-

A Five-Year Term Begins

As Dr Hiroshi Nakajima (Japan) began his five-year term of office as WHO's new Director-General on July 21, the guns were being stilled in Afghanistan and along the Iraq-Iran border.

Those events gave fresh attestation to the worth of the U.N. system. It was a U.N. negotiator who made possible the Afghan solution and a U.N. Security Council resolution (No. 589) that prompted the cease-fire in the Gulf. It is the United Nations that now has the responsibility of resettling Afghan refugees.

WHO's new chief referred to those hope-filled developments in his first statement to the press. "We are reminded by such events that faith and determination has its rewards," he said noting then that "one is encouraged that peace in our time is possible."

But he warned that "time however, is not on our side. The gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' continues to grow."

A WHO staff member since 1973, Dr Nakajima first served at headquarters in Geneva, and then, beginning in 1979, for nine years in Manila as Director, WHO's regional office for the Western Pacific. He is the first Director-General to have headed-up a regional office.

Among his recent statements:

On Change: "This is what allows the good things we do to become better, and the less than successful ones to be replaced by daring innovations."

On the Elderly: "A large elderly population supported by a reduced population of working age will place a severe strain on economic resources of most, if not all, countries."

On Finances: "In the face of fiscal adversity, WHO remains unique in that its... member states continue to endorse the organization’s objectives."

On Health for All: "While I do not question our total commitment to Health for All, I do feel that this has been open to too many individual interpretations which have resulted in the dissipation of our momentum."

On Hypertension: "It may be that as technologies such as home blood pressure monitoring becomes widely available, control will further improve."

On Infectious Diseases: "Legionnaires’ disease, toxic shock syndrome, and AIDS, were largely unforeseen. We cannot be complacent about infectious disease in the 21st century."

On Technology: "When manufacturing is transferred to countries with lower production costs, new technologies should be more accessible to all. I note the successful programmes in China to produce high-quality prosthetic heart valves from biological materials at relatively low cost."

On Tobacco: "Tobacco use is a self-destructive and anti-social habit. Let us rid the world of it."

On who: "I am only the top end of a vast complex piece of machinery that is WHO. Unless each individual piece functions properly, things cannot work."

PolioPlus Goes Over the Top With $220 Million

PolioPlus, a fund-raising campaign by Rotary International, ended last June with some US $220 million in contributions either received or pledged—about $100 million more than the $120 million goal set in 1986.

The contributions were made to help finance WHO's programme of immunization launched in 1974, and—following a decision last May by the World Health Assembly to rid the world of this crippling disease—the eradication of polio by 1990.

(In a joint statement from the Moscow summit last June U.S. President Ronald Reagan and the Soviet Union's General Secretary Mikhail Gorbatchev "reaffirmed their support for the WHO/UNICEF goal of reducing the scale of preventable child­hood deaths...")

Polio is the second disease targeted to be wiped out from the face of the earth. The first was smallpox, certified eradicated in May 1980 after a 13 year battle spearheaded by WHO.

To date, PolioPlus contributions have made possible the immunization of more than 400 million children in 67 countries. About 70 per cent of funds were raised by Rotarians them-
Newbriefs

- Aging: A Report Card. These recent examples, from East and West, underscore a slow but growing awareness of the needs of the elderly, whose numbers are increasing throughout the world.
  - The designation of the Red Cross General Hospital in Pyongyang (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) as a WHO collaborating centre in gerontology and geriatrics on the basis of its espousal of traditional medicine in preventing and treating age-related ailments.
  - The appointment of George Hees as first Minister of State for Seniors for Canada, a country with 2.7 million citizens over the age of 65.
  - The study by the American Association of Retired Persons, Washington, D.C.—partly funded by WHO’s regional office of the Americas—on older women in the Caribbean and Latin America.
  "It is clear that death will be progressively delayed," says Dr Hana Hermanova, in charge of WHO’s programme of health for the elderly. "It is less certain that disabling morbidity will be delayed correspondingly."

- Dumping on Africa. Parliamentarians in Africa have appealed for the assistance of their counterparts throughout the world to prevent their continent from "becoming a dumping ground for radioactive and toxic wastes from industrialised countries."
  Meeting recently in Brazzaville under the theme "Health, A Basis for Development in Africa," some 50 parliamentarians from 22 African countries also asked that the issue of dumping—a growing practice—be placed on the agenda of the next session of the U.N. General Assembly.
  They met under the auspices of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Geneva, the International Postal Union, and WHO.

- People. Appointed as Deputy Director-General—WHO’s second top post—Dr Mohamed Abdelmoumène (Algeria), a staff member since 1963, who served as chief of the office of research promotion and development until his new appointment in July.
  His was the first appointment made by Dr Hiroshi Nakajima (Japan) on taking office, 21 July, as WHO’s fourth Director-General.
  Named Director-General Emeritus, Dr Halfdan Mahler (Denmark), WHO’s third Director-General, who served for three five-year terms, during which WHO and its member states chose as their common goal health for All by the Year 2000.

- Saving Medicinal Plants. Experts who met recently in Chiang Mai, Thailand, under the aegis of WHO, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, and the World Wildlife Fund have called for an international programme to be set up for the conservation of medicinal plants “to ensure that adequate quantities are available for future generations.”
  Because of “habitat destruction and unsustainable harvesting practices,” they say, by the year 2000 there is the danger of some 20,000 plants becoming extinct.

- "Tell the world what you’re doing about AIDS." That’s the slogan for World Aids Day to be observed on Thursday, 1 December. As there is neither vaccine nor medicine against the dreaded Acquired Immuno-deficiency Syndrome, the only defences to date against the disease are health education and public information.

Reducing the Number of Animal Tests

A Swiss foundation for animal protection in the eastern canton of Graubunden has presented a cheque for CHF 900,000 (equivalent to about US$30,000) in recognition of studies that should lead to a reduction in the number of animals used in testing the efficacy and safety of contraceptive drugs.

One result of the studies, carried out by WHO’s programme of research in human reproduction, is that the US Food and Drug Administration now requires that such drugs be tested on rats for two years, beagles for three years and mice for 18 months.

Previously, tests were needed on beagles for seven years, on monkeys for ten, as well as on rats for two. The tests are carried out to determine if drugs are carcinogenic (cancer-causing).

The presentation was made by Professor Gerhard Zbinden, of Switzerland’s Federal Institute of Technology and University of Zurich. He is also vice-president of the foundation, which is named after himself and a German colleague, Hildagard Doerenkamp, its President.

In the next issue

In most parts of the world, there are simply not enough health resources—staff, equipment and money—to meet all the needs. The more ordinary people can do to look after their own personal health, the less will they need to have recourse to limited health services. The November issue of World Health suggests what all of us can do to be healthy and stay healthy.