Editorial

Women’s health is high on WHO’s agenda

Health, a fundamental human right, is still denied to many women throughout the world, often because their lower social and economic status increases their specific biological vulnerabilities. Such factors combine to affect women’s health early in childhood. In many parts of the world, girl children receive less food, less education, less health care than boys. This puts them at a disadvantage both as children and later on as adults. Their reproductive role also imposes particular stresses and risks on women for much of their lives. Half-a-million women die each year, 90% of them in developing countries, from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth. Nearly all of these maternal deaths are preventable. If we want to give equitable care to women and meet their specific health needs, we must integrate reproductive health services into primary health care and make them easily available locally.

As mothers, women are the frontline providers of care within the family and the key to human development and well-being. Their health, in its turn, has a strong impact on that of the children they bear and raise. Because of this inter-generational link, the improvement of women’s health is the surest means of improving children’s and family health in general. Our Executive Board has decided to make women’s health one of WHO’s highest priorities together with reproductive health and family health.

Any sustainable improvement in women’s well-being is inseparable from improvements in their social and economic status. This will be achieved by giving women greater power over their own lives, educating them, and providing opportunities for them to earn an income. Women must be recognized as equal partners.

Education is crucial. A woman who has access to education is better able to enhance not only her own health but also that of her family and community. She is better informed on nutritional needs, on the kind of local foods she should use and how she should cook them. She will be able to make her own choices on family planning, to protect herself from cervical cancer and to avoid HIV infection. She will be better able to reject practices that imperil her health. Better equipped to make the right decisions concerning her children and family, she will also be better able to play an active role in improving the society in which she lives.

But women should not be left to shoulder that heavy responsibility alone. Men must help them fulfil their potential and, at the same time, men must also take their share of responsibility in promoting the family’s health.

Over the coming years, WHO will pursue the integration of all its programmes which are related to improving women’s health and well-being. We will also advocate that all development policies and activities, at both national and international levels, give special attention to reducing inequities in health and fulfilling women’s specific needs. WHO welcomes the World Conference on Women which is held in Beijing as a precious opportunity to promote women’s health and well-being and their full participation in all aspects of social development.

Hiroshi Nakajima, M.D., Ph.D.