

WHO frontline worker dies of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)



On 29 March 2003 Dr Carlo Urbani, who worked in WHO programmes in Cambodia, Laos and Viet Nam, died in Bangkok of severe acute respiratory syndrome at the age of 46. He was the first WHO officer to detect this new disease, and caused surveillance to be heightened and many new cases to be identified and isolated before they infected hospital staff.

“He was very much a doctor; his first goal was to help people,” said Pascale Brudon, the WHO representative in Viet Nam. “Carlo was the one who quickly saw that this was something very strange. When people became concerned at the hospital, he was there every day collecting samples, talking to the staff and strengthening infection control procedures.”

Carlo Urbani received his medical degree from Ancona, Italy, and did post-graduate work in malaria and medical parasitology. Before joining WHO staff he was president of *Médecins Sans Frontières* Italy, and was a member of the delegation that went to Oslo to receive the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to MSF in 1999.

WHO's Director-General, Gro Harlem Brundtland, said “Carlo Urbani's death saddens us all deeply at WHO. His life reminds us again of our true work in public health.”

Carlo Urbani was married and the father of three children.

SARS virus identified

On 16 April WHO announced that a new pathogen, a member of the coronavirus family never seen before in humans, is the cause of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). The speed with which the virus was identified is the result of close collaboration between 13 laboratories in 10 countries. Much of the evidence in recent weeks had pointed to strong associations between this virus and the disease, but there had been no conclusive confirmation.

“The pace of SARS research has been astounding,” said David Heymann, Executive Director of WHO's Communicable Diseases programmes. “Because of an extraordinary collaboration among laboratories from countries around the world, we now know with certainty what causes SARS.”

The collaboration of leading laboratories was established after WHO issued a global alert on SARS on 12 March 2003. Two laboratories in China recently joined the network, consisting of laboratories in Canada, France, Germany, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China, Japan, the Netherlands, Singapore, the UK and the USA.

The objective of the 13 laboratories was to meet Koch's four postulates for proving the identity of a disease's causal agent: it must be found in all causes of the disease; it must be isolated from the host and grown in pure culture; it must reproduce the original disease when introduced into a susceptible host; and it must be found in the experimental host so infected. Heinrich Koch, the German bacteriologist, set out these postulates in 1882, the year he isolated the bacillus that causes tuberculosis.

WHO and the network of laboratories dedicate their detection and characterization of the SARS virus to Carlo Urbani, the WHO scientist who first alerted the world to the existence of the disease (see “Frontline health worker” above).

Daily updates on the SARS outbreak are available at www.who.int.

China faces nationwide SARS epidemic

On 23 April, China's Ministry of Health informed WHO's China office of 306 newly reported probable cases of SARS, including the first cases from the provinces of Tianjin, Hebei, Hubei and Shandong. The cumulative number of reported probable cases is now 2305. Beijing had the highest number of new probable cases (211), followed by Shanxi (38) and Guangdong (27). Twenty of China's 31 provinces have now reported probable cases, with another six reporting suspected cases.

Among health workers, 48 new probable cases were reported in Beijing and 8 in Guangdong, bringing the cumulative number of reported probable cases among health workers to 517. Beijing reported 10 deaths and Tianjin 2, bringing the cumulative number of deaths to 106.

A Cross Straits Conference on SARS is in progress in Beijing as this issue of the *Bulletin* goes to press, and is due to end on 24 April. It was organized by the Chinese Medical Association, the Chinese Association of Preventive Medicine, and the Chinese Hospital Association. Experts, scholars and health professionals from China, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR), Macau SAR and Taiwan province are exchanging information on SARS and discussing ways of improving case management and infection control. WHO staff attending made a presentation on the global SARS situation.

The health situation in Iraq is bleak

The WHO press office issued the following update on April 16.

A team from WHO has conducted a preliminary assessment of health facilities in the northern town of Mosul, in Ninawa Governorate. They report that the main hospitals in the town have been partially looted, and are operating at about 50% capacity. Most of the health centres in Mosul are also reported

to have been looted and burnt, as have the Department of Health offices and at least some of their warehouse facilities.

WHO is working with local health authorities in the three Northern Governorates to support health facilities in Kirkuk. They have agreed to move emergency supplies to Kirkuk to meet some of the urgent needs identified during the last few days. WHO is also working to find ways to provide urgently needed financial support to keep the health system in Kirkuk working.

The situation in Baghdad continues to be a source of major concern. The Central Public Health Laboratory has been looted, and incubators containing polioviruses have been stolen. There have also been reports from elsewhere in Iraq of virus cultures being stolen. This is very unlikely to cause disease, but is a serious concern because these cultures are vital for research and public health work.

Hospitals in Baghdad which are reported to be functioning to some extent include the Medical City complex of four hospitals, and Yarmouk, Kadhimiya and No'man hospitals. WHO staff will continue to visit the major hospitals in the city in order to assess, prioritize and meet the most urgent needs.

Contact with WHO staff in Baghdad has been restored and their news is bleak. The WHO office in Baghdad has been very badly looted and burnt. All the official vehicles have been stolen from the compound and much valuable equipment and information has been destroyed.

On 29 March WHO appealed urgently for US\$ 185 million to meet immediate health needs — 60 million for medicines and other medical supplies and equipment, and 125 million on building minimum capacity to respond to outbreaks and everyday needs, and on rehabilitating hospitals and health centres.

Daily updates on the health situation in Iraq can be found at www.who.int.



World Health Day 2003: healthy environments for children.

J. Littlewood

Unhealthy environments kill 5 million children a year

“It is a little known but devastating fact that every year over 5 million children aged between 0 and 14 die, mainly in the developing world, from diseases related to their environments — the places where they live, learn and play,” said WHO’s Director-General, Gro Harlem Brundtland, at the ceremony to mark World Health Day in New Delhi, India.

World Health Day, 7 April 2003, was devoted to “Healthy environments for children”. WHO used the occasion to urge United Nations and other agencies to do more to reduce the environmental hazards children face. These include unsafe drinking-water, poor sanitation, disease vectors, air pollution, chemical hazards and unintentional injuries. Acute respiratory infections, malaria, diarrhoea and accidents are the major causes of death in childhood, and they can be drastically reduced by simple environmental improvements.

Among the simple measures that have the power to prevent illness and save lives are hand-washing with soap; safe sanitary facilities; clean water storage, and treatment where necessary; ventilation in the home; use of insecticide-treated nets; and road safety.

The Healthy Environments for Children Alliance was launched in 2002 in Johannesburg, at the World Summit for Sustainable Development.

Global cancer rates to rise by 50% by 2020

Cancer rates could increase by 50% to 15 million new cases a year by the year 2020, according to *World cancer report*, published on 3 April by WHO and the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). The predicted sharp increase will be due mainly to increasing longevity in both developing and industrialized countries, current smoking trends, and increasing adoption of unhealthy lifestyles.

In the year 2000, malignant tumours were responsible for 12% of the nearly 56 million deaths occurring globally from all causes, the report says. In many countries, over 25% of the total deaths are from cancer. Globally in 2000, 5.3 million men and 4.7 million women developed a malignant tumour, and 6.2 million people died of the disease. The report also shows how cancer has become a major public health problem in developing countries, with effects comparable to those in the industrialized ones.

Paul Kleihues, Director of IARC and co-editor of the Report, said, “This report calls on governments, health practitioners and the general public to take urgent action. Action now can prevent one third of cancers, cure another third, and provide good palliative care for the remaining third.”

The report gives details on the global burden of cancer, its causes, the major types of malignancies, early

detection, and treatment. It cites smoking as the most important avoidable risk of cancer, followed by infection (23% of malignancies in developing countries, 8% in industrialized ones), and Western lifestyles characterized by a highly caloric diet combined with low physical activity.

For the book (352 pages, US\$ 25.00) contact bookorders@who.int ; for more information about it, contact Nicholas Gaudin, IARC Communications, at com@iarc.fr . ■

Photo contest questions perceptions of disability

At the time of launching the *International classification of functioning, disability and health* (ICF), WHO invited photographers around the world to participate in a photo contest called "Images of health and disability". The aim was to raise questions about what health really is, and awareness of how everybody in the course of their life experiences some kind and degree of health decrement or disability. Several hundred photographs came in, of which 47 won awards. This issue of the *Bulletin* shows one from childhood and one from old age.



"Chilling out" in Uganda.



"Reading passion" in Romania.