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HOW 36 MILLION DEATHS CAN BE AVOIDED GLOBALLY BY 2015

36 million lives could be saved worldwide by 2015 if deaths from chronic diseases, such as heart disease, stroke, and cancer, are reduced by an additional 2% annually, concludes a landmark series of papers published online today (Wednesday October 5, 2005) by *The Lancet*.

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The authors are calling for the 2% annual decrease in mortality to be set as a global goal for the international community. The target is based on the achievements of several countries that have implemented effective interventions to prevent chronic diseases. In a **Comment** to accompany the series Richard Horton, Editor of *The Lancet*, states that the goal should be added to the eight existing Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which currently lack any commitment to reducing chronic diseases. The series, consisting of four papers, aims to fill a gap in the global dialogue about disease. Its publication coincides with the release of a global report on chronic diseases by the World Health Organization.

The first paper in the series reveals that, globally, around 58 million people will die in 2005; 35 million of these deaths will be from chronic diseases. The authors calculate that in 2015 these figures will rise to 64 million and 41 million, respectively. They estimate that reducing deaths from chronic diseases by an additional 2% annually would result in around 36 million fewer chronic disease deaths between 2005 and 2015 worldwide, of which 28 million would be averted in low-income and middle-income countries.

20% of deaths from chronic diseases in 2005 will be in high-income countries, while 80% will occur in low-income and middle-income countries. The scientific knowledge exists to prevent a large proportion of these chronic disease deaths. Studies suggest that at least 80% of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and 40% of cancer could be avoided through healthy diet, regular physical activity, and avoidance of tobacco use. In the second paper in the series the authors outline a novel public health approach that can be used to reduce the burden of chronic diseases in low-income and middle-income countries. The stepwise framework takes

in account the limited resources and the double burden of infectious and chronic diseases that exists in many low and middle-income countries.

The third paper in the series looks at the situation in India, where chronic diseases are estimated to account for 53% of all deaths. The paper outlines the actions that need to be taken to curb the rising burden of chronic disease in India. The final paper in the series focuses on the prevention of chronic diseases in China, where 300 million men smoke cigarettes, 160 million adults have high-blood pressure, and an obesity epidemic is imminent.

Dr Horton comments: "The reduction of chronic disease is not a Millennium Development Goal (MDG). While the political fashions have embraced some diseases—HIV-AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis, in particular—many other common conditions remain marginal to the mainstream of global action on health. Chronic diseases are among these neglected conditions . . . Without concerted and coordinated political action, the gains achieved in reducing the burden of infectious disease will be washed away as a new wave of preventable illness engulfs those least able to protect themselves. Let this series be part of a new international commitment to deny that outcome."

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