GLOBAL HEALTH HISTORIES SEMINARS

Essential and inessential medicines:
The changing role of pharmaceuticals in world health

The presentation of former director of TDR, Dr Adetokunbo Lucas will critically examine the initial strategy adopted by TDR following its foundation by WHO in 1975 as a Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, and evaluate the impact on control of leprosy, onchocerciasis, and Chagas’ disease. Lucas also discusses how TDR’s success in obtaining Merck's commitment to the donation of ivermectin to control onchocerciasis "for as long as is needed" led to a new phenomenon of “pharmaco-philanthropy”, in which the pharmaceutical industry seeks partnerships in promoting the health of poor people in poor countries.

The post-war drug boom that brought “miracle cures” such as penicillin, cortisone and streptomycin also launched many other medicines that were less impressive. In 1977, WHO designated a list of 186 “essential drugs” in an attempt to place medicines alongside clean water, adequate housing, and a safe food supply in a short list of things necessary to ensure basic living conditions. Since then the methods, metrics, and politics of procuring essential medicines have become increasingly important to global health concerns. Professor Jeremy A. Greene, of Harvard University and Brigham & Women’s Hospital and Harvard Medical School, describes the evolution of the essential medicines concept within a longer history of pharmaceutical standardization at the WHO.

Co-organized with The Wellcome Trust; the Wellcome Centre for the History of Medicine at University College London; the Wellcome Unit for the History of Medicine at the University of Oxford, together with the Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases, and the Department of Control of Neglected Tropical Diseases at WHO.

Contact: Hooman Momen, Coordinator WHO Press, Department of Knowledge Management and Sharing (KMS) +41 22 791 1162 (momenh@who.int). Website: http://www.who.int/global_health_histories/en/