Health at the UN Climate Change Conference

Building sustainable health systems: Focus on climate resilience was a major side-event focusing on health during the UN 2012 Climate Change Conference (COP-18) held in Doha, Qatar from 26–27 December. The session addressed the relationships between climate and health, and emphasized climate-sensitive health risks; policies to improve health equity and to address climate change; and improved health as a way to strengthen resilience. It also highlighted increased donor engagement, technical support, and regional and national initiatives, stressing that these must all be continued. Panelists underscored the need to place health at the heart of climate change responses. Discussion ranged from engagement of civil society in South Africa; specific health impacts of climate change in Burkina Faso; The Doha Declaration on climate, health and well-being issued by an alliance of health and medical organizations; and the effectiveness of bottom-up, community-based health initiatives.

The event was coordinated by the World Health Organization (WHO) in collaboration with the Government of Norway. Full coverage of the health side event is available from the International Institute for Sustainable Development. For more information on the broader COP-18 outcomes, click here.

Italy develops national plan for elimination of asbestos-related diseases

The recent national asbestos conference in Italy reviewed the challenges of asbestos-related environmental clean-up and health surveillance for people exposed to asbestos. The outcomes of this conference will result in a national action plan to elimination of asbestos-related diseases. Two decades after a national asbestos ban, Italy still registers about 1200 new cases of malignant mesothelioma annually. Ministers of health, labour and environment, as well as WHO and the European Commission participated in the conference, held 22–24 November in Venice, Italy. WHO information on elimination of asbestos-related disease is available here.

Mapping ‘hot spots’ to prevent lead poisoning in children

Lead poisoning among children can be reduced substantially by mapping soil contamination levels to identify and keep children away from high-risk areas. According to a study published this month in the public health journal Bulletin of the World Health Organization, this may be particularly true in countries with a long history of mining. The study compared lead contamination levels in the soil in and around two mining areas in Peru, one of the world’s top producers of silver, copper, gold, zinc and lead. Lead exposure in many parts of the world is decreasing thanks to phasing out of leaded gasoline, the banning or restrictions on the use of leaded paint, and measures to control emissions of lead from industrial processes. “These measures have not been universally adopted, and there are still many areas of high lead contamination, in particular because of poorly-controlled mining, smelting, manufacturing and recycling activities,” said Joanna Tempowski, a scientist at the Evidence and Policy on Environmental Health unit in WHO. WHO and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) have established a Global Alliance to Eliminate Lead Paint, to minimize the risks that such paints pose. The Blacksmith Institute, an international non-profit organization, has identified over 500 global sites polluted with lead, with an estimated 16 million people at risk of exposure. Click here for the full article.
Treating medical waste, protecting health and the environment

A low-cost autoclave for treatment of health care waste was recently launched at a rehabilitation hospital in Dar es Salaam, in the Republic of Tanzania. The 'non-burn' technology was developed at the University of Dar es Salaam College of Engineering as part of the initiative: Best practices and technologies for reducing health care waste to avoid environmental releases of dioxins and mercury. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) representatives from the seven countries involved in the project met in Tanzania to report on their successes and to view the autoclave. The objective is to develop a low-cost, non-burn technology, thus avoiding the release of dioxins and furans, which are known carcinogens and which are subject to the provisions of the Stockholm Convention on persistent organic pollutants.

The Global Environment Facility has approved the next phase of this project to be implemented in 2013 in four countries: Ghana, Madagascar, Tanzania and Zambia where the technology is expected to be piloted for further refinement and production by small enterprises.

International Conference on Radiation Protection in Medicine

The recent International Conference on Radiation Protection in Medicine reviewed advances, challenges and opportunities for improving radiation protection in the next decade. With over 200 papers submitted, the fruitful discussions during eight topical sessions and four roundtables provided the basis for a Call for action on improving radiation safety in health care-settings. The conference was held in Bonn, Germany, 3–7 December, and was organized by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), cosponsored by WHO and hosted by the Government of Germany. Over 600 participants from more than 90 countries took part. More information click here.

Radiation risk communication in paediatric imaging

Radiological medical procedures are essential in health care and can save lives. But health professionals often have low awareness of safe radiation doses and associated risks. This is particularly critical in paediatric imaging, because children have a higher sensitivity and a longer life-span to develop long-term radiation-induced health effects.

More than 60 professionals and patients’ advocates participated in a WHO Workshop on Radiation Risk Communication in Paediatric Imaging to improve informational, motivational and persuasive messages tailored for effective radiation risk communication with various audiences, and to collect stakeholders’ feedback on a draft communication tool. The workshop was held on 2 December in Bonn, Germany.