The world has reached a crucial moment in the history of HIV/AIDS, and now has an unprecedented opportunity to alter its course. The most important message of the latest World Health Report is that, today, the international community has the chance to change the history of health for generations to come and open the door to better health for all. Tackling HIV/AIDS is the world’s most urgent public health challenge. Unknown barely a quarter of a century ago, it is now the leading cause of death for young adults worldwide. More than 20 million people have died from it and an estimated 34–46 million others are now infected with the virus. There is as yet no vaccine and no cure.

The World Health Report 2004 – Changing History, published by the World Health Organization, calls for a comprehensive HIV/AIDS strategy that links prevention, treatment, care and long-term support. Until now, treatment has been the most neglected element in most developing countries: almost 6 million people in these countries will die in the near future if they do not receive treatment – but only about 400 000 of them were receiving it in 2003.

WHO and its partners have declared the treatment gap a global emergency and have launched a drive to provide 3 million people in developing countries with antiretroviral therapy by the end of 2005 – one of the most ambitious public health projects ever conceived. This report shows how it can be done. It goes further, looking beyond 2005 to explain how international organizations, national governments, the private sector and communities can combine their strengths and simultaneously fortify health systems for the enduring benefit of all.

Illustrated with photographs of people whose lives have been deeply affected by the global pandemic, The World Health Report 2004 makes essential reading for everyone with a political, professional or personal interest in health.