Protecting children from harmful chemical exposures

Forum IV recommendations and agreed action items on Children and Chemical Safety

Children represent the future of our societies. Protecting the health of children and ensuring that children live in safe environments will allow them to reach their full potential. As scientific understanding of the linkages between health and exposure to toxicants increases, we are becoming more aware that children and the developing fetus can be especially vulnerable to some chemicals in the environments where they grow, live, play, learn and work. Governments and stakeholders have a responsibility to take action to reduce the sources of chemical risks and prevent childhood exposure. Children and chemical safety was a special focus of discussion at the Fourth Session of the Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety (Forum IV) held 1 to 7 November 2003 in Bangkok, Thailand, hosted by the Government of Thailand. Over 500 participants, representing over 125 governments, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and industry were in attendance. Forum IV recommended that the following actions be taken to protect children from harmful chemical exposures:

1. When assessing the protection of children, consideration should be given to chemical exposures that can occur during preconception, throughout gestation, infancy, childhood and adolescence.

2. Governments should prepare, through multi-stakeholder consultation, initial national assessments of children's environmental health and chemical safety. These assessments should identify the priority concerns and provide a basis for developing action plans to address those concerns. Governments should provide a progress report to Forum V. WHO is requested to develop, through multi-stakeholder consultation, guidance tools, and to assist at least three countries in different stages of economic development in each region to prepare the assessment and action plans by 2006.

3. Governments, with support from stakeholders, particularly WHO and UNICEF, should promote education and training on children's chemical safety, and where risks are identified, governments and stakeholders should commit to taking action to prevent or reduce exposure. Governments should also promote harmonized data collection, research, legislation and regulations, and consider the use of indicators of children's environmental health, and report back to Forum V in 2006. Governments should, when setting acceptable levels or criteria related to chemicals, take into consideration the potential enhanced exposures and/or vulnerabilities of children.

4. WHO is requested to support, collaborate with, and coordinate among research organizations and those supporting research (such as the European Commission, Science NGOs, the Global Health Research Forum, governments and others) to develop mechanisms to facilitate collaborative national and international research and share technology.

5. Governments and stakeholders should commit to sharing information on options for taking effective action to protect children from established chemical threats and from chemical risks where there is a degree of uncertainty. WHO is requested to convene a multi-stakeholder meeting to explore the mechanisms for collecting data and disseminating information that could be used to reduce uncertainty in risk assessments.

6. In addition, Forum IV requests the IFCS President to convey these recommendations to other meetings and fora.

In carrying out the recommendations set out in this priority, the stakeholders concerned should be guided by the full decision document and companion information paper that were developed by the Forum Working Group. These documents are available at: www.ifcs.ch and at www.who.int/ceh.