RESPONSE TO

WHO: EB146 and WHA73: Development of a menu of policy options and cost-effective interventions to promote mental health and well-being - WEB-BASED CONSULTATION

Pesticides are responsible for about one in five suicides worldwide. An estimated 15 million deaths have occurred from pesticide suicides since the start of the agricultural Green Revolution, which placed highly hazardous pesticides into rural communities completely unable to use or store them safely.\footnote{1}

Restriction of access to highly lethal and commonly used suicide methods is one of the few proven approaches available to governments to reduce overall suicide rates. This approach to highly hazardous pesticides has already saved many tens of thousands of lives in Sri Lanka, South Korea, Bangladesh, India, and elsewhere. Targeting just a few highly hazardous and locally problematic pesticides, with careful preparation and identification of safer alternatives, agricultural yield has not been affected.

The WHO model clearly demonstrates that a regulatory ban of highly hazardous pesticides will be a very cost-effective intervention to prevent suicide, particularly for low- and middle-income countries where the major burden of pesticide suicide exists. The availability of functioning national pesticide regulation and enforcement systems will ease the process and further increase cost-effectiveness.

Restricting access to means has long been used to tackle the global challenge of suicide. In high-income countries, it has largely focused on restricting the sales or banning medicines that are commonly taken in fatal overdoses, removing carbon monoxide from household gas, and making high-risk locations (such as bridges) safer. In low- and middle-income countries, where pesticides are a common means of suicide, it has focused on government actions to remove highly hazardous pesticides from agriculture. But many pesticides long since banned in high income countries are still widely used in low- and middle-income settings.

Means restriction works because suicidal impulses are often transient, lasting only minutes or hours. The easy accessibility of lethal means, such as guns or highly hazardous pesticides,
during these periods may make the difference between survival and death. Surviving a suicide attempt allows a person to return to her or his family and community and often find a solution to their troubles. They can also receive the support they need from the mental health services. The great majority of people who survive such an attempt do not go on to repeat it or to die from suicide. Means restriction makes suicidal impulses survivable, whatever the surrounding situation and stresses.

Pesticide regulation is therefore very effective at preventing suicide despite the complex factors that cause a person to attempt suicide. Statements that pesticide regulation will not prevent suicides are simply wrong as clearly shown by data from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and South Korea where regulation resulted in stunning falls in suicide rates. Suicide rates can be brought down rapidly and affordably through means restriction without a need for psychosocial and economic interventions.

Pesticide regulation is a proven feasible approach to suicide prevention. It is supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and by the FAO/WHO Panel of Experts on Pesticide Management.\textsuperscript{2,3} We believe that Ministries of Agriculture and Health should work together to implement this cost-effective approach to suicide prevention.

Prof Michael Eddleston, University of Edinburgh, UK
Prof David Gunnell, University of Bristol, UK
Prof Flemming Konradsen, University of Copenhagen, Denmark

REFERENCES

