
Global Update

WHO Joins Battle Against A New Emerging Disease, Buruli Ulcer

On the occasion of his visit to Cote d'Ivoire, Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO), announced the deployment of a coalition of international efforts against Buruli ulcer, a terrible disease which mainly strikes young people, in particular in Africa. Cases have been reported since 1948 in Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, Ghana and Uganda.

A veritable emerging disease, though little known, Buruli ulcer is an extremely crippling mycobacterial infection associated with tropical humid environment, which destroys tissues and causes horrifying lesions to the limbs of affected persons. It seems on its way to replacing leprosy as a social scourge in, for example, Cote d'Ivoire, where some 400 cases have been recorded since 1978.

Dr. Nakajima stated that a working group specially set up by WHO will be meeting for the first time in 1998 to take stock of current knowledge about this

disease and propose a two-year plan of action which will receive technical and logistic support from the division in charge of the worldwide tuberculosis control programme at WHO headquarters in Geneva.

Many questions remain unanswered regarding the agent of this disease, called *Mycobacterium ulcerans*, the conditions of its survival in the natural environment and its mechanisms of transmission to man. The influence of BCG vaccination on the occurrence of the disease and the part that may be played by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the apparent increase in cases of Buruli ulcer observed recently are also to be the subject of in-depth studies.

At present, there is no medical treatment for effectively controlling Buruli ulcer, which is the third most widespread mycobacterial disease in the world after tuberculosis and leprosy. The only treatment possible consists in extensively excising the lesion and making a skin graft, which is not only long and costly but leaves sequelae. The disease exists in the form of endemic foci in the marshy parts of the tropical and subtropical regions of Asia, Oceania, Latin America and Africa.

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