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## *Global Update*

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### **Health Impacts of Climate Change**

Recent reports of the links between El Nino and a range of impacts on health have underscored the sensitivity of several human diseases to climatic factors. These findings have contributed to increased attention being paid to human health issues by policy-makers assembled in Kyoto, Japan, for the high-level segments of the third Conference of Parties (COP-3) for the United Nations Convention on Climate Change.

Although El Nino finds its origins in climate shifts in the Pacific Ocean, scientists have long established strong secondary climatic effects on continents as far away as Africa, (South) Asia and North and South America. At the first Inter-Agency Climate Change and Human Health Monitoring Workshop organized last week in London by the World Health Organization (WHO) in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the British Medical Research Council (MRC), epidemiologists confirmed that malaria epidemics in Pakistan and Colombia have occurred in response to increased temperatures connected to El Nino. In South-East Africa, the regional WHO cholera surveillance team, warned by early forecasts of an El Nino-related drought, was able to help reduce the severity of a cholera outbreak in Mozambique with increased monitoring and heightened preparedness of health care institutions in the area.

In addition, there is some evidence that

malaria is increasing in incidence in a number of highland regions, for example in Kenya, which is compatible with global warming although other ecological factors may be involved as well.

Following a WHO report on Climate Change and Human Health, published in collaboration with the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and UNEP last year, these latest insights have contributed to a greater awareness amongst policy-makers that human health could be severely jeopardized by global warming. Several of the world leaders addressing the Kyoto Conference alluded to the threat of new and spreading infectious diseases.

Scientists at last week's London meeting drew attention to the urgent need for close global climate monitoring in conjunction with climate impacts on human health through intensified disease surveillance in areas especially sensitive to climate change, such as highland areas in tropical countries and coastal zones.

In addition to expected long-term health benefits resulting from reduced combustion of fossil fuels there will be immediate benefits from reduced levels of air pollution. A joint report of WHO and the World Resources Institute, presented in Kyoto, revealed that as many as 700,000 lives worldwide could be saved annually by accepting a 15% reduction of the 1990 greenhouse gas emission levels, due to reduced respiratory disorders and other health consequences associated with air pollution.

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Abstracted from the World Health Organization Press Release WHO/91, 9, December 1997.

### **WHO's New Electronic Journal Promotes Evidence Based Reproductive Health Care in Developing Countries**

On 4 March 1998 the World Health Organization (WHO) launched in London, United Kingdom, its new annual peer-reviewed electronic journal *The WHO Reproductive Health Library* (RHL). RHL contains systematic reviews of controlled clinical trials on priority reproductive health topics, expert commentaries on the relevance for developing countries of the findings in the reviews, and practical advice on the management of reproductive health problems. During the same week RHL was also launched by its regional editors in China, Mexico, South Africa, Thailand and Uruguay. RHL was launched in India during the third week of March 1988.

RHL's main aim is to promote evidence-based care in the area of reproductive health by making available to health workers the most reliable and up-to-date medical information. Although primarily intended for use in developing countries, WHO expects that RHL will be of interest to health care professionals throughout the world.

RHL is being provided in electronic form (on a 3.5-inch diskette) so that large volumes of data can be made available at a low cost. RHL runs under Windows TM operating system and its use requires no special knowledge of computers. It comes with its own search engine, allowing rapid and easy access to the data in it.

Subscription to RHL will be free of charge for health workers in developing countries. Availability of RHL in devel-

oped countries will be restricted to scientists and institutions working closely with WHO or in developing countries. Other can access the reviews contained in RHL through a paid subscription to *The Cochrane Library* (available from Update Software, Oxford, UK). Additional material in RHL will be published on WHO's Internet web site ([www.who.ch](http://www.who.ch)).

Few medical journals publish comprehensive systematic reviews on the effectiveness of health care interventions in developing countries. Such information remains scattered in different papers in numerous journals, making it very difficult for health practitioners to get a good overview of all the data available on a given subject. On the other hand, most health workers working outside of teaching hospitals have little or no research experience and even when they have access to medical journal they often find it difficult to interpret correctly the significance of new findings for their practice. What makes RHL unique is that the reviews contained in it are not only comprehensive but also prepared using a systematic methodology. To make the findings in the reviews more relevant to developing countries, RHL includes expert commentaries on the findings in the reviews and practical advice on the management of reproductive health problems in developing-country settings.

The systematic reviews included in RHL are taken from the The Cochrane Library, which is published by the Cochrane Collaboration, and is made up of several databases containing systematic reviews of health care interventions. These reviews are based on data from controlled clinical trials published in major medical journals in all world regions in all languages. All re-

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Abstracted from the World Health Organization Press Release WHO/27, 4 March 1998.

views are checked annually to see if they are up-to-date and are updated when new data become available. Rigorous scientific criteria are used in selecting and interpreting the studies included in the reviews. Hence, Cochrane reviews are increasingly being acknowledged as a major source of reliable, evidence-based medical information.

Areas of interest to RHL include sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy and childbirth, neonatal diseases, breastfeeding, menstrual disorders, subfertility and

infertility, fertility regulation, and gynecological cancers. Issue No. 1 of RHL contains 27 Cochrane reviews and 22 peer-reviewed commentaries with practical recommendations for the management in developing countries of reproductive health problems at primary and secondary levels of care. For further information and to obtain a copy of RHL, please contact Mr. Jitendra Khanna, Special Programme of Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction, WHO, Geneva. Telephone (4122) 7913345. Fax (4122) 791 4171; e-mail: [khannaj@who.ch](mailto:khannaj@who.ch)

