

WHO's Asvall Addresses Health Care Priorities

" Never before have we seen such fascinating possibilities for promoting health--and never before have we faced a situation in Europe of so much uncertainty, where great achievements of the past can risk being lost," J.E. Asvall, MD, WHO's regional director for Europe, stressed in his keynote address.

Asvall presented a framework for European health strategies in the 21st century, emphasizing the direct link between social and economic conditions and health risk factors in the region. Among the 50 nations in WHO's European division, countries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union are suffering the most serious health challenges, due to economic decline, he said. Falling living standards and rising unemployment have yielded numerous social problems in recent years, and health indicators reflect this.

The " greying of Europe" as the over-65 population proliferates, violence arising from ethnic conflict, and immigration and population shifts also are major factors influencing European health policy today. Declining life expectancy, re-emerging infectious diseases like diphtheria, and increasing industrial pollution are plaguing parts of Europe as a result, he said.

Influencing lifestyle choices will be the "most problematic" health challenge for the next century, Asvall said--reversing European smoking habits, reducing health problems related to alcohol abuse, and changing dietary patterns in countries where low-fat foods are more expensive are ongoing battles.

He said forging a bond between the fields of health services and public health also will be imperative for the health of Europe in coming years: "The time has come to tear down, once and for all, the wall which has separated these two aspects of health care and bring to an end to the competition and in-fighting."

WHO calls improving quality of care "a major challenge for the 21st century," and it has already implemented a model program for quality of care development for diabetes throughout Europe. This model, Asvall noted, underscores the idea that promoting quality of care is a matter of "creating the conditions that can facilitate a systematic, continuous improvement of the outcomes of daily care throughout the health care system."

Finally, Asvall implored European health professionals to "work on a strong scientific basis ... have a heart, have guts ... and reach out to all partners and professional groups."