

New WHO Secretary-General Outlines Global Health Priorities

Gro Harlem Brundtland, MD, the former prime minister of Norway, was nominated as the Secretary-General of WHO last January. Brundtland, 58, who is expected to be elected by WHO's membership in May, will become the first woman to head WHO. A graduate of the Harvard School of Public Health in the US, she was a doctor with Norway's health service until 1974. In a presentation to WHO's Executive Board in January, excerpted below, Brundtland discussed her agenda for health care.

"Am I a doctor or a politician? Certainly, I am both. But I also feel there are many commonalities. As a doctor and as a politician you have to ask: What is the problem? What is the symptom? How can we prevent and cure? In short: What needs to be done, who needs to be involved, and how should we act together to reach common goals?"

"I am deeply convinced that WHO should be--and can be--a catalyst for raising the status of health on the international political agenda. We cannot allow health to remain a secondary dimension as we focus our international resolve into a new century. Health is pivotal. Health is the core of human development..."

"We face a formidable task. The strain on limited resources will be compounded when, by the turn of the century almost half of humanity will live in urban centers. A failure to manage the urban infrastructure will lead to further mushrooming of settlements having insufficient access to essential facilities such as clean water, sanitation, food supplies, transport, education, health care and other public services. We know what that means. Pollution of water, pollution of air and pollution of food. Overcrowding, increased violence, mental illness, alcohol and drug abuse and a complex disease pattern linked to poverty and an unhealthy environment..."

"The challenges are staggering. We must counter the HIV/AIDS pandemic. We are witnessing the reemergence of old diseases, such as TB. In the midst of spectacular progress in the pharmaceutical field, we see that microbes are catching up and in critical cases all available drugs are losing their effectiveness..."

"Addressing all these multifactorial problems is complex. But we still have basic public health tools available--prevention and health promotion. We must use those tools actively at the community level and country level with strong global leadership from WHO."

"The scale and scope of new and old health challenges call for good analysis and long-term planning of an extremely sophisticated and forward-looking type. It calls for planning across sectors. But public health concerns must be the basis of our thinking. The costs of making the wrong decisions and of not making decisions, but hoping that the invisible hand will straighten things out will be enormous."

"To be a strong global advocate for health in all development efforts must be a prime task for the new leader of WHO. No other investment in this world yields higher socioeconomic profits than investments in people's health."