

Living Up to the Promise of a Healthy Future for the World's Children

According to studies conducted by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), some 11 million children die each year from preventable or treatable causes before reaching their fifth birthday. Another one million between the ages of 10 and 19 die from accidents, suicides, or violent acts that might have been avoided, or illnesses that could have been cured. And, approximately 70 percent of all premature deaths among adults can be traced back to behaviors initiated before the age of 20. But this is merely the tip of the statistical iceberg. An estimated 1.2 million children are victims of trafficking; 150 million are malnourished; more than 120 million do not attend school; nearly 10 million are refugees; and 11.5 million are living with HIV/AIDS. These grim numbers recently prompted government officials and public health leaders from around the globe to ask themselves if they had lived up to the promises they made at the 1990 World Summit for Children, when they pledged to build a better, healthier future for youth.

As they gathered in New York City this past May, delegates to the United Nations Special Session on Children answered this question with a resounding "no."

According to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, "The world has fallen short of most of the goals of the World Summit for Children not because these goals were too ambitious or technically beyond our reach, [but] because of insufficient investment." And why, he asked, when "for every dollar invested in the development of a child, there is a seven dollar return for society?" His question reflects the fact that all too often the healthcare needs of children—physical, behavioral, and emotional—are not perceived as being important enough to warrant special attention. This perception, however, has

been changing, and there is a growing awareness of the obligation to address the specific concerns of youth, particularly those who fall into high-risk segments of the population.

This issue of *CommonHealth* focuses on the health of children and young adults. The articles found within these pages clearly demonstrate the importance of providing appropriate services and educating young people to make informed, intelligent decisions about their own health and well-being. By offering them a comfortable, non-judgmental atmosphere in which to discuss their concerns, and instilling in them a sense of their own intrinsic value as human beings, healthcare providers can bestow a priceless gift upon the youth they treat. But healthcare services are not the only ones that reach and interact with at-risk youth. Equally important to the community-based approach to healthcare is the inclusion of social service programs—particularly those that focus on mitigating behaviors that otherwise might have a negative impact on health.

Delving into topics ranging from how to conduct health needs assessments of youth, and create programs and services designed to meet those needs, to the plight of homeless children throughout the region, and ways of preventing high-risk sexual behaviors among teens, the purpose of this issue is to shine a spotlight on the health challenges that young people face, and discuss strategies for overcoming these threats. Other articles explore subjects such as the impact of human trafficking on women and children; the need to move from models based on institutionalization to ones that rely on community-based social services; and the efforts of AIHA partners to address the various health needs of youth in their communities.

The articles in this issue underscore the fact that every child has the right to receive the clinical and educational services necessary to develop into a healthy, productive adult. Young people are our most precious resource; they are our future and must be treated as such. By providing them with both the care and the knowledge they need to thrive, AIHA partners can help ensure a healthier tomorrow. ■



Photos: Suzanne E. Grinnan