

# Infectious diseases biggest killers of children, young adults

WASHINGTON (IPS) — The World Health Organization has identified six infectious diseases as the world's biggest killers of children and younger adults and called for renewed global efforts to contain them. The six — AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis (TB), measles, diarrheal diseases, and acute respiratory infections (ARI), such as pneumonia — account for 90 percent of all deaths due to infectious diseases among people under 44 years of age, according to a WHO report.

Each of the six, which together caused over 11 million premature deaths last year, can be effectively contained at a cost of less than \$20 per victim, WHO said. Three of them — measles, diarrheal diseases and ARIs — can be treated or prevented for under 35 cents per potential victim, according to the report, "Removing Obstacles to Healthy Development."

"The vast majority of those deaths took place in poor countries where, according to WHO, infectious diseases account for almost

half of all deaths and a much bigger percentage of the deaths of children under five years of age.

The 68-page report, described by WHO as a "wake-up call" to spur renewed international action against the microbial threats, also stresses that time may be running out for halting their spread, particularly in an era of globalization.

"Because of drug resistance, increased travel and the emergence of new diseases, we may only have a limited time in which to make rapid progress," according to WHO's new director-general, former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Brundtland. WHO's first comprehensive report on infectious diseases, the study was hailed by Nils Daulaire, president of the Washington-based Global Health Council as a "clear battle plan" in the fight against them.

"This report puts things together in an internally consistent way and lays out a clear battle plan that says, 'these are the six

priorities, and this is what we're going to focus on,'" Daulaire said.

Of the 11 million premature deaths caused by infectious diseases last year, ARI took the biggest single toll: 3.5 million, of which almost two million were of children living in poor countries. Yet, treatment of pneumonia — which requires taking antibiotics for five days — could cost as little as 27 cents, according to the report.

AIDS accounted for 2.3 million deaths last year, more than 1.5 million of which were young adults in developing countries.

While no cure or vaccine is yet in sight, WHO notes that a year's supply of condoms, which can prevent the spread of AIDS-causing HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, can be obtained for \$14. Diarrheal diseases, which rival ARI as the world's biggest child-killer, destroyed 2.2 million lives last year. Yet, it can be treated successfully by oral rehydration salts costing only 33 cents per case.

Tuberculosis, a disease once thought to be

under control, killed 1.5 million people last year, making it the biggest single killer of adolescents and adults. Aside from AIDS, it is also the most expensive to treat — about \$20 of medication over six months for a special program called "Directly Observed Treatment, Short Course" or (DOTS).

Malaria accounted for 1.1 million deaths last year, about two-thirds of which were of children. The disease, however, can be effectively prevented by insecticide-treated mosquito nets costing about \$10 each.

Measles killed some 900,000 youngsters last year but can be prevented through immunization campaigns costing 26 cents per dose.

All of these diseases do not just create personal tragedies for the individuals and families involved. The report argues that while good health is often a result of economic development and improved living standards, the opposite is also true: that the control of infectious diseases removes barriers to economic growth.

## Nehemiah

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