
Press Release

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WHO Warns of Growing Chemical Risks to Developing World

GENEVA, 13 May – The World Health Organisation says the growing dangers posed by chemical use in developing countries are putting worsening strain on health professionals.

In a paper submitted to ICCM2, the second International Conference on Chemicals Management, the WHO says: “The health sector is faced with additional roles and responsibilities due to increased production and use of chemicals in developing countries and those in economic transition. This includes increased risk assessment needs... and dealing with the impact of chemical incidents on human health.”

The paper says: “Chemical production and use is increasing worldwide. This is particularly true in developing countries and those with economies in transition where chemical production, processing and use is closely tied to economic development. The introduction of new chemicals into a society requires the health sector to expand its traditional roles and responsibilities...”

Among recent chemical incidents it lists are an outbreak of mass sodium bromide poisoning in Angola in March 2008, which affected 467 people. In February 2009 18 Senegalese children died when a district in Thiaroye sur Mer, Dakar, was contaminated by lead from recycled batteries. The dumping of toxic

waste in Ivory Coast in 2006 resulted in eight deaths, and about 85,000 health-related consultations.

The WHO paper says: “Such events are believed to represent just the tip of the iceberg.” In December 2005 the *WHO Bulletin* listed what it called “acute chemical incidents of potential international concern” which had occurred between August 2002 and December 2003. There were 35 such incidents, from 26 countries. Examples - all occurring in 2003 - included an unusual number of cases of unexplained spastic paralysis in a Tanzanian village; the contamination of water and soil with pesticides from an abandoned storage depot in Somalia; and a leak of natural gas and hydrogen sulphide which killed 233 people in China.

The authors of the *Bulletin* report say: “The lack of global data on the occurrence of chemical incidents of potential international concern makes planning for major incidents difficult.”

The WHO paper submitted to this week’s ICCM2 - which ends on 15 May – calls for greater participation by the health sector in the work of SAICM, the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management. The ICCM is SAICM’s governing body.

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Notes to Editors

See WHO's page on *Environmental health in emergencies*, at

http://www.who.int/environmental_health_emergencies/en/index.html

There will be two side events at ICCM2 on 13 May, between 1300 and 1500, hosted by the UN Environment Programme and WHO. The first is *Chemical Incidents, Accidents and Emergencies: New Guidance and Tools from International Organisations*. The second is *Public Health and Chemical Emergencies: New Tools from WHO*.