

treatment from a doctor. People like Yevgenia Grigorian, a 51-year-old unemployed woman living in Yerevan's Erebuni district, who says: "I have to use lemon, tea, vinegar, that sort of thing when any of us are ill."

Today's crisis also contains the seeds of tomorrow's catastrophe. Again according to the UN rapid assessment, because they lack the funds, some people no longer cultivate the land, which means less and poorer food in the shops in the coming months and years. Others struggle to feed themselves now, increasingly buying food with borrowed money.

"Household dietary diversity has decreased with a drop in the consumption of meat and vegetables other than potatoes," says Danielyan, referring to the results of the UN rapid assessment. In Yerevan, Thovmasian is buffered somewhat by the harsh realities of rural life, but even there, she sees the effects of the shrinking economy. "Now it's getting worse," she says. "Things are more expensive. We can't pay for transport and we can't pay for food."

And that's when things are going relatively well. Because for all the hardships suffered by Thovmasian, her health-care needs are at least partially covered by the government. For those not qualifying for free services under the BBP, things get a good deal grimmer. There is a system of partial subsidy for people with less serious disability and pensioners without family support; and the ministry of health provides medicines free of charge for certain cancers, diabetes, tuberculosis, psychiatric diseases, epilepsy, myocardial infarction, familial Mediterranean fever



WHO/Omnik Krikorian

A food market in Yerevan. In the current global economic downturn, more and more Armenians are facing the stark choice between buying food or medicines for their families.

and malaria; but beyond that, they are pretty much on their own. "It's simple," says WHO's Danielyan. "The working population, people with low income, sufficient to pay only for food, cannot acquire essential medicines."

So what is to be done? Part of the problem is the lack of pricing regulation for medicines. A new draft law covering price regulation and reimbursement is under consideration. But would that be enough? When the International Monetary Fund published a gloomy report on the prospects for the Armenian economy in May, it recommended government spending to support the poor and vulnerable groups through the current crisis, particularly in the light of the shortfall in remittances. In other words: throw money at the problem until the global economy cranks up again. Indeed, it seems that the Ministry of

Finance is now reconsidering planned cuts in the health budget.

Danielyan isn't convinced that this measure is sufficient to solve the problem. "There needs to be fundamental change in the way risk is shared, and service delivery model is organized and funded," she says. "There is a need to ensure the correct functioning of social protection mechanisms that would make it easier for the population as a whole to afford health care." But isn't this the wrong time to be implementing major overhauls? Not necessarily, says Danielyan: "We need to take advantage of the current crisis in an intelligent way and initiate moves that would be less likely under normal circumstances, in the sense of applying insurance principles that have been used in western Europe for decades" she says. ■

Recent news from WHO

- Half of 1.27 million people who die in **road traffic crashes** every year are pedestrians, motorcyclists and cyclists, according to a new WHO study released on 15 June.
- WHO Director-General Dr Margaret Chan urged governments to base their policies on fairness. Speaking at the United Nations Headquarters in New York on 15 June, she said that **health disparities** within and between countries should be taken as a human development indicator.
- On 11 June, WHO raised the influenza A (H1N1) pandemic alert to phase 6, but stressed that this referred to geographical spread of the disease and not severity of cases or number of deaths. As of 15 June, 76 countries had officially reported 35 928 cases of the infection, including 163 deaths. Based on available scientific evidence, WHO said that the overall severity of the **new pandemic influenza strain** was moderate.
- WHO recommended on 5 June that **rotavirus** vaccination be included in all national immunization programmes to provide protection against a virus that is responsible for more than 500 000 diarrhoeal deaths and 2 million hospitalizations every year among children.
- WHO won this year's **Prince of Asturias Award** for International Cooperation. The jury for the award announced its decision on 27 May in Oviedo, Spain.
- WHO and the International Atomic Energy Agency announced on 26 May the launch of the Joint Programme on Cancer Control aimed at strengthening and accelerating efforts to fight **cancer** in developing countries.

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