

# **The World Health Report 1995**

*Bridging the gaps*



**World Health Organization  
Geneva**

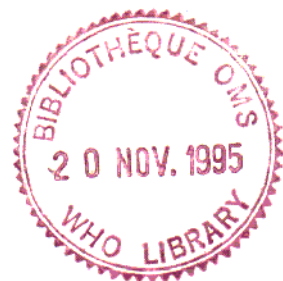
# ***The World Health Report 1995***

*Bridging the gaps*

*Report of the Director-General*



*World Health Organization  
Geneva  
1995*



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## Message from the Director-General

It is with mixed feelings that I introduce *The World Health Report 1995*, for I believe no reader can turn the following pages without being struck by the scale of the global human tragedy described within them. In that sense, I am the bearer of bad news.

Producing this report, the first in an annual series, has been my personal responsibility because of the top priority given to it by the WHO Executive Board's working group on the WHO response to global change. It is not merely a statistical report, although the statistics themselves tell their own disturbing story. It is more about people's health as it affects their quality of life than about the diseases from which they suffer. As such, it is a devastating portrait of our times. It is the story of the children, adolescents, adults and elderly of this world, and the many circumstances that influence their health. In each of these age groups and also between the sexes, the report shows, there are stark and often shocking inequities in health and in access to even basic health care.

*The World Health Report 1995* exposes these gaps – and advocates ways in which they can be bridged – in a form that I believe has not been attempted before. Most of all, it illustrates the growing gulf between those of us who read the report and those who are the main subject of it – the more than one billion people on this planet who live in extreme poverty.

For many of us, improvements in the quality of our lives are almost taken for granted. But at the same time vast numbers of people of all ages are suffering and dying for the want of safe water, adequate sanitation and basic medicines. This, in the last few years of the 20th century, is unacceptable.

Poverty, this report shows, is the world's deadliest disease. It wields its destructive influence at every stage of human life, and for most of its victims the only escape is an early grave. Poverty provides that too: while life expectancy is increasing in the most developed countries, it is actually shrinking in some of the poorest. For many millions of people for whom survival is a daily battle, the prospect of a longer life may seem more like a punishment than a prize.

The widening gaps between not just rich and poor, but between the poor and the poorest of all, and between those who have access to health care and those who are denied it, pose a risk that needs urgently to be recognized and countered.

The challenge is to prevent the world heading towards a health catastrophe in which many of the great achievements in health of recent decades will be thrown into reverse. There are already worrying increases in cholera, tuberculosis and plague – all diseases closely linked to poverty – while immunization rates against potentially fatal diseases are beginning to stumble backwards in some countries.

Growing inequity is literally a matter of life and death for many millions of people, since the poor pay the price of social inequality with their health. Evidence from some industrialized countries shows that a widening income gap between the rich and poor is accompanied by growing differences in mortality. On the other hand life expectancy has risen most rapidly in those developed countries where income differences have narrowed. In other words, it is the equity gap that counts. Improving the health of nations therefore

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*Our efforts are dedicated towards charting a better, healthier future for humanity; a future in which millions of children no longer face death in infancy nor their mothers death in childbirth; a future in which everyone has an equal chance of good health.*

depends on reducing inequities both between countries, and between the rich and poor within a country.

As one of the purposes of *The World Health Report 1995* is to show what WHO is doing to help bridge the gaps, it includes a chapter on the Organization's contributions to world health – contributions that involve all its staff, whether working in the field or at regional offices or at the Geneva headquarters. It gives some idea of the wide range of activities in which WHO is involved, and some of our recent achievements. Clearly, however, the health challenges facing the world cannot be met by one organization alone.

WHO's efforts to improve health and quality of life are grounded in the firm belief that in order to bring about the necessary changes, health policies must reach beyond the health sector, while remaining rooted in the health-for-all principles of primary health care. Health is becoming a central political, social and economic issue in all countries, and health concerns must therefore be taken up at the highest political level and given due consideration in all public policies.

A better understanding is now emerging of the crucial contribution that good health makes to economic activity – enabling individuals to lead a self-fulfilling and socially and economi-

cally productive life. Perhaps the most important task of WHO is to impress upon the international community the need for political commitment to placing health and human beings at the centre of development goals. Health is not a drain on a country's resources, it is a worthwhile investment. More than that, it is the foundation on which all human endeavour rests.

Our efforts are dedicated towards charting a better, healthier future for humanity; a future in which millions of children no longer face death in infancy nor their mothers death in childbirth; a future in which everyone has an equal chance of health. The means exist; what are lacking are the commitment and resources to apply them so that the goals can be achieved. *The World Health Report 1995* is about many things, but most of all it is about people, particularly those whose plight is most desperate, and whose needs are greatest.

Their fate, like the report itself, is in your hands. I urge you not to set it lightly aside.



*Hirashi Nakajima, M.D., Ph.D.  
Director-General  
World Health Organization*