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APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY FOR HEALTH

The health bill of the industrialized nations, with less than 30 per cent of the world's population, is already over 300 thousand million dollars each year. All countries have a right to expect at least the same level of health, but many of them can hardly shoulder such an immense financial burden. Moreover, there is no direct relationship between the amount of money spent on conventional medical care and the overall health of the people. A totally new approach is therefore needed.

One of the most fundamental of WHO's activities in partnership with the developing countries is its programme on primary health care and rural development. Yet attempts to bring health care and protection against disease to the remoter and least well served areas of the Third World are constantly handicapped by the absence of simplified, low-cost materials, methods and techniques designed for or adapted to local conditions.

In the past it was too easily assumed that technology imported from the industrialized countries would automatically solve the developing nations' problems, including those of health. This led to the wholesale adoption of costly and inappropriate methods and techniques which benefit only a few people and contribute little to the widely dispersed communities of rural farming societies. Money that might have been better spent has been squandered on such efforts and, in the process, the developing health services have become unduly dependent on the advanced industry of the developed world. Indeed many

industrialized countries are now beginning to reassess the appropriateness of their own technologies.

The right tools for the job

A resolution adopted by WHO's Member States at the World Health Assembly in May 1976 stressed that primary health care and health technology must go hand in hand. As a direct result, WHO has now embarked on a new programme entitled "Appropriate Technology for Health". Its objective is to help national governments solve the problems encountered in primary health care programmes (particularly those problems aggraved by the lack of an appropriate technology), at the same time both reducing the current dependence on imported technology and increasing the effectiveness of national health services.

Why "appropriate" technology? Because the kind of technology the programme is searching for must be right not only for the particular problem but also for each individual country's situation. It must be scientifically sound and operationally effective -- in some cases advanced scientific skills will be necessary for its initial development. But it must also be acceptable both to the decision-makers and to the communities it serves; it must be tailored to the existing local financial, technical and manpower resources, and it must recognise local cultural constraints.

The targets

Drawing on skills, knowledge and creativity from many disciplines, the programme will concentrate on health care

problems which a suitable technology might help to solve. Sometimes an effective solution already exists, but is either little known or unacceptable; or it has been found, but needs to be improved. When there is no known solution, a new technique has to be sought out and tested.

The search will focus both on methods and materials - equipment, tools, devices, chemicals, drugs, biological substances - and as how to use them to best effect. But this is only part of the story. The technical difficulties confronting a health project are often aggravated by operational, financial or cultural constraints. So the WHO programme will also deal with ways of encouraging people to accept new technologies, training staff for their use and maintenance, and the proper production, distribution and application of instruments and materials in the countries where they are needed.

Further steps will be; in collaboration with the countries concerned to build up a list of health care problems; to make a census of appropriate technology already in use that could be applied in other countries; and to draw up an inventory of institutions, groups and individuals throughout the world with a special interest in appropriate technology for the health sector. An essential element will be a system for collecting information on existing and new technologies and making it available to those whose needs are greatest; namely those who face the actual problems in the field.

Once a list of priority needs has been worked out, research and development contracts will be negotiated with appropriate technology groups in various parts of the world. The intention is to begin work as soon as possible on some of the technological problems already identified and to start field trials in one or two countries. In all these activities, WHO is assuming a coordinating role.

Challenge for the future

A great deal is already happening all over the world today in the field of appropriate technology. Those activities which are potentially of value to the health sector need to be identified and coordinated. The success of the new programme will depend on the readiness of countries to commit themselves to its aims and challenges. Many still have to be convinced that locally produced, low-cost, simple technologies are not automatically second-rate. In fact to develop appropriate technologies in the developing world calls for much more ingenuity than is generally believed. Health professionals in all countries must be prepared to modify present conventional attitudes and accept alternative ways as well as some traditional practices of proven value.

Because the new programme reaches beyond the usual boundaries of the health sector, it has been planned from the start as a collaborative effort with all those agencies, institutions and individuals concerned in the development of

national resources.

It provides an unprecedent opportunity for the developed and developing world to work in partnership for the benefit of all.