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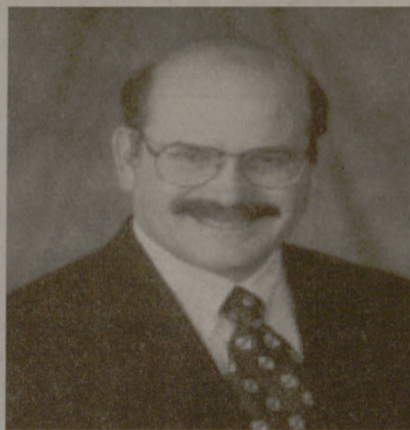
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WHO report ranks top health hazards, calls for bold strategies

LONDON (AP) — Governments may have to consider legislation to reduce the salt, fat, sugar and other unhealthy ingredients in manufactured foods, according to a new report by the World Health Organization.

The recommendation is in this year's annual World Health Report, which for the first time tries to rank the major threats to health worldwide and examine ways to reduce them.

The report examines the 20 biggest risks to human health and their impact on disease, disability and death. It estimates that if these threats were tackled, at least an extra decade of healthy life could be achieved in even the poorest countries, and people in the richest nations could gain another five years of healthy life.

Food and drink play a central role in many of the health risks examined, from the top-ranked problem of underweight to the scourge of overweight, ranked 10th.

"Bold policies are required," the report says. "A mixture of public and private sector agreements and legislation are required to create the social milieu for health gains resulting from tobacco taxation or gradual changes to food manufacturing."

WHO Director General Dr. Gro Brundtland noted that Britain had successfully reduced the salt content in bread and many processed foods, "and I'm sure with sugar it could be the same. You could obviously get a code of conduct where certain products should not have a sugar level over X."

Detailed, accurate and easily understandable labels about fat content also are needed so that people know what they are eating and have a choice, she said.

The report, one of largest research projects ever undertaken by the U.N. health agency, also concluded that alcohol is responsible for far more deaths and disease than previously thought.

Malnutrition is still the worst health problem, accounting for one in 14 deaths globally.

A summary of the findings was published Wednesday in the online version of The Lancet



medical journal, accompanied by a critique by two Cambridge University experts who cautioned against placing too much emphasis on the relative rankings of the different health hazards.

They said the estimates depend on the quality of the studies underlying them and that some hazards, such as high blood pressure, have been extensively studied and are well understood, while others, such as exercise and diet, are less understood and their importance has likely been underestimated.

"Public health surveillance on this scale is a new and immature, science," said the scientists, Dr. John Powlles and Nicholas Day from the Institute of Public Health at Cambridge.

"This exercise ... should still be regarded as a report of work in progress."

The top 10 health hazards worldwide, in terms of how much disease and death they cause, are, in order of danger: underweight, unsafe sex, high blood pressure, tobacco, alcohol, contaminated water, sanitation and hygiene, iron deficiency, indoor pollution, high cholesterol and obesity.

"This report brings out for the first time that 40 percent of the global deaths are due to just the 10 biggest risk factors, while the next 10 risk factors

add less than 10 percent," said Alan Lopez, a WHO senior science adviser.

The report also ranks the hazards separately for three groups: the poorest regions such as sub-Saharan Africa and parts of South Asia, the developing countries and the developed world. No individual country listings are given.

In the poorest group, malnutrition was by far the worst health hazard, followed by unsafe sex — which refers to the massive HIV/AIDS burden in those areas.

Researchers were surprised to find that indoor pollution from the burning of manure and charcoal for cooking causes much illness and death. It was the fourth-leading health hazard in that region, behind unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene, but had never been noticed before, said the report's lead author, Dr. Christopher Murray, executive director of WHO's global program on evidence for health policy.

In other developing countries, alcohol turned out to be the biggest menace to health, followed by high blood pressure and tobacco. Underweight and overweight jostled for position in fourth and fifth places respectively. Cholesterol came next, followed by low fruit and vegetable intake.

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