

Introduction

Does the environment adversely affect our health? This and related questions have ranked high on political and public agendas in recent months. Glasnost has extended the concerns of Western Europeans towards Eastern Europe, both because of fear that environmental problems in the East, such as Chernobyl, can have real and perhaps even measurable consequences in the West, and because of natural compassion for our fellow citizens in the new European House.

The World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe (WHO/EURO) is the only organization with responsibility for the health of the residents of the 32 Member States in the Region, and is charged with the problem of managing the environment of Europe as a resource for health. Environmental health management on such a scale can be done only through the realization of and acceptance that a healthy environment, in the broadest sense, is the responsibility of many: individuals; organizations; enterprises; professional and public societies and associations; and local, sub-regional and national governments. Accompanying this responsibility is the right of all concerned to information on the state of the environment and on the state of health, as well as to the results of studies intended to demonstrate the presence or absence of links between the two.

WHO/EURO is developing a programme on European environmental health information systems (EEHIS) to deal with the requirements of providing accurate, adequate and available information to enable the orderly process of public, private and governmental decision-making with respect to priorities and solutions for environmental health management. A fundamental effort must be directed towards describing the status of our knowledge in this complex area. Decades of various efforts by national and local organizations to monitor environment and health for various reasons have produced too much information to be gathered into one database.

A recent consultation (Berlin (West) 21–25 November 1988), recommended that WHO/EURO develop a metadatabase: such an effort would produce a directory, including details of content and access, of the holders of relevant information within the European Region. Towards this effect, a consultation was held in Munich from 8–10 May 1989 with the intention of establishing the principles and guidelines for the creation of such a metadatabase. The following articles are a selection of those national programmes that are being developed in this direction. The consultation made several wide-ranging recommendations: (1) to identify a single institution charged with the development of a “standard” model metadatabase which would then act as a focal point for a European network of national metadatabases in addition to acting as its own national focal point; (2) to canvass existing multinational databases with the intention of

examining how material is held and whether data relevant to a pilot exercise, “response to chemical incidents”, are comparable; and (3) to develop the model metadatabase around the need to have access to information on toxicity of chemicals and substances, population exposures, the results of studies of health outcomes and special surveys, the details of “grey literature” and non-standard bibliographic references, and the large body of information on non-chemical risks including social variables, quality of and access to public health care, and information of local variations in lifestyle, occupational exposures, etc.

Information must be considered as a precious resource, the value of which far outweighs the costs incurred in its acquisition and management.

The purpose of publishing these articles is to demonstrate the wide range of approaches taken by those organizations responsible for such metadatabase efforts within the European Region, as well as to reinforce the concept that such a programme must be developed in a unified way for the entire Region. We hope that readers will take note of the universality of the problem of identifying the location of information needed for informed decision-making and encourage interested parties to contact WHO/EURO regarding collaboration in the EEHIS programme.

(Note that a selection of papers presented at the Berlin (West) consultation has appeared in a previous issue of this journal. The summary report from this earlier consultation is included in this issue.)

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