

# **Report of the global forum on elimination of leprosy as a public health problem**

**Geneva, Switzerland  
26 May 2006**



**World Health  
Organization**

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## Executive summary

Leprosy, one of the most ancient, feared and disabling diseases of humankind, is on the verge of defeat. The 1991 World Health Assembly resolution<sup>1</sup> was a catalyst, and today 116 out of 122 endemic countries have eliminated leprosy as a public health problem.

To acknowledge this unprecedented achievement against leprosy and to encourage the international community to continue its efforts, a global leprosy forum took place in Geneva, Switzerland, on 26 May 2006 at a special session during the 59th World Health Assembly.

Since 1985, prevalence of leprosy has been reduced globally by more than 90% and over 14.5 million patients have been cured through multidrug therapy (MDT). This success has been made possible by the strong commitment of endemic countries supported by the international community, including the Nippon Foundation and the Sasakawa Memorial Health Foundation; Novartis and the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development; bilateral organizations; and national and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), notably the International Federation of Anti-Leprosy Associations (ILEP).

The strategy to eliminate leprosy is twofold: (i) improving access to diagnosis through integration of leprosy control services into existing public health services; and (ii) providing effective drugs free of charge. Early detection of cases has dramatically reduced the risk of deformities and disabilities among patients, ensuring that leprosy sufferers can lead normal lives with dignity.

Since 1995, the World Health Organization (WHO) has provided treatment free of charge to all leprosy patients worldwide thanks to generous contributions from the Nippon Foundation, Novartis and the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development. High-level political support and social marketing campaigns to change the image of leprosy have also significantly contributed to pushing the disease towards elimination.

Leprosy control has now reached a critical milestone: patient numbers have dramatically reduced in recent decades, although pockets of the disease remain in several countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Identifying the last patients at the local level is increasingly difficult, delaying their treatment before deformities occur. Greater attention should therefore also be paid to patients who face human rights violations and who require help for their physical and socioeconomic rehabilitation.

A good surveillance system is essential for sustainable leprosy control in countries which have eliminated leprosy as a public health problem.

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution WHA44.9. *Elimination of leprosy as a public health problem*. Geneva, 44th World Health Assembly, May 1991 (available at <http://www.paho.org/English/AD/DPC/CD/lep-wha-1991.htm>; accessed October 2006).

The global leprosy forum calls for stronger political commitment and further efforts to combat the disease through a coordinated intersectoral approach, substantial increases in funding, and greater participation of NGOs and foundations.

## **Opening remarks**

***Dr Margaret Chan, Assistant Director-General,  
WHO Communicable Diseases***

I would like to dedicate this forum to the memory of Dr Jong-wook Lee, who started his career at WHO by fighting this disease and continued throughout his career to demonstrate the highest personal and professional commitment to its elimination.

Leprosy, a disease which has devastated mankind from time immemorial, is no more a dreaded and intractable problem. This dramatic change in the leprosy situation in recent years has been made possible not only through generous donor support but also by the strong political commitment of Member countries themselves.

Since the adoption in 1991 of the World Health Assembly resolution on the elimination of leprosy, the prevalence of leprosy has fallen globally by over 90%, new case detection by about 50%, and the number of endemic countries by 120. This degree of achievement by countries, supported through WHO, would not have been possible without the generous support to the Organization of the Nippon Foundation, stretching back over a period of 30 years and including support to programme activities as well as the supply of MDT drugs, particularly during the period 1995–2000. WHO's other major partner in the free supply of high-quality MDT drugs since 2000 is Novartis, which has generously promised to continue such support until at least the end of 2010.

Currently, leprosy is largely confined to four countries in Africa and one country each in Asia and Latin America. There are also major pockets of the disease surviving within the larger endemic countries which have recently reached the leprosy elimination target at the national level. These remaining problem areas cannot be ignored, and vigorous action must be taken to ensure that leprosy is eliminated at global, national and local levels. Furthermore, there is an important need to sustain leprosy elimination globally, so that leprosy can become truly insignificant as a public health problem by the end of 2010.

This is not a time to relax or be complacent: the final phase of this fight against leprosy is as critical as the earlier phases.

By adopting a public health approach to leprosy, diagnosis and treatment of the disease have been brought closer to affected communities. Millions of patients have been protected from developing disabilities. Unfortunately, some patients have been disabled by leprosy because of delays in starting treatment. We need to pay greater attention to their physical and socioeconomic rehabilitation, and the human rights violations faced by some of them. This calls for a coordinated intersectoral approach, substantial funding and greater participation of NGOs and foundations. In this connection, the efforts made by the Nippon Foundation through Mr Yohei Sasakawa, the WHO Goodwill Ambassador for Leprosy Elimination, have been exemplary. The key to success in all these efforts will be the more intense participation of civil society and of those affected by leprosy. I sincerely hope that this area will receive increased attention in the future.

Let us pledge that we will continue to further strengthen our efforts to eliminate leprosy, until we finally fulfil our commitment to Member States and help them free themselves from the devastating scourge and stigma of this disease.

***Dr Shaik Kahder Noordeen, President, International Leprosy Association***

This global forum is an important event to review the achievements made so far based on World Health Assembly resolution 44.1 of 1991 on elimination of leprosy as a public health problem. An earlier forum held in May 2001 reviewed progress during the first 10 years. Now we are updating the progress made in the following five years. All these achievements would not have been possible without the strong political commitment of WHO Member States and the strong support provided by various partners, including NGOs.

With this brief introduction, may I invite the speaker to make the keynote address.

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