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# **The use of essential drugs**

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Report of a  
WHO Expert Committee

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Geneva, 29 November–3 December 1982

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# THE USE OF ESSENTIAL DRUGS

## Report of a WHO Expert Committee

The WHO Expert Committee on the Use of Essential Drugs met in Geneva from 29 November to 3 December 1982. The meeting was opened on behalf of the Director-General by Dr B. Sankaran, Director, Division of Diagnostic, Therapeutic, and Rehabilitative Technology.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In a report<sup>1</sup> to the Twenty-eighth World Health Assembly in 1975, the Director-General reviewed the main drug problems facing the developing countries and outlined possible new drug policies. The Director-General also referred to the experience gained in some countries where schemes of basic or essential drugs had been implemented. Such schemes were intended to extend the accessibility of the most necessary drugs to those populations whose basic health needs could not be met by the existing supply system. He pointed out that the selection of these essential drugs would depend on the health needs and on the structure and development of health services of each country, and that lists of essential drugs should be drawn up locally, and periodically updated, with the advice of experts in public health, medicine, pharmacology, pharmacy and drug management. He also considered that adequate information on the properties, indications and use of the drugs listed should be provided. By resolution WHA28.66, the Health Assembly requested the Director-General to implement the proposals contained in his report and, in particular, to advise Member States on the selection and procurement, at reasonable cost, of essential drugs of established quality corresponding to their national health needs.

Following wide consultation, an initial model list of essential drugs was issued in the first report of the Expert Committee on the

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<sup>1</sup> WHO Official Records, No. 226, 1975, Annex 13, pp. 96-110.

Selection of Essential Drugs.<sup>1</sup> This was subsequently revised and updated in a second report.<sup>2</sup>

In undertaking a further review of the list the present Expert Committee has throughout been guided by the following statement contained in the previous reports:

*"Because of the great differences between countries, the preparation of a drug list of uniform, general applicability and acceptability is not feasible or possible. Therefore, each country has the direct responsibility of evaluating and adopting a list of essential drugs, according to its own policy in the field of health.*

*"The list of essential drugs based on the guidelines put forward in this report is a model which can furnish a basis for countries to identify their own priorities and to make their own selection."*

## 2. GUIDELINES FOR ESTABLISHING A NATIONAL PROGRAMME FOR ESSENTIAL DRUGS

Since the first report on the selection of essential drugs was published in 1977, the concept of essential drugs has become widely recognized as useful. It has provided a rational basis not only for drug procurement at national level but also for establishing drug requirements at various levels within the health care system. In fact, many developing countries have already selected essential drugs according to their needs and the related programmes are, in some cases, in an advanced stage of implementation.

In order to ensure that an essential drugs programme is adequately instituted at national level, several steps are advised:

(1) The establishment of a list of essential drugs, based on the recommendations of a local committee, is the starting-point of the programme. The committee should include individuals competent in the fields of medicine, pharmacology and pharmacy, as well as peripheral health workers. Where individuals with adequate training are not available within the country, assistance from WHO could be sought.

(2) The international nonproprietary (generic) names for drugs or pharmaceutical substances<sup>3</sup> should be used whenever available, and

<sup>1</sup> WHO Technical Report Series, No. 615, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> WHO Technical Report Series, No. 641, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> See *International Nonproprietary Names (INN) for Pharmaceutical Substances: Cumulative List No. 6*, Geneva, World Health Organization, 1982. Further lists of proposed and recommended INN are issued periodically as supplements to the *WHO Chronicle*.

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