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The selection of essential drugs

Report of a
WHO Expert Committee

World Health Organization
Technical Report Series
615



World Health Organization Geneva 1977

ISBN 92 4 120615 2

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PRINTED IN SWITZERLAND

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OF ESSENTIAL DRUGS

Geneva, 17-21 October 1977

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THE SELECTION OF ESSENTIAL DRUGS

Report of a WHO Expert Committee

A WHO Expert Committee on the Selection of Essential Drugs met in Geneva from 17 to 21 October 1977. The meeting was opened on behalf of the Director-General by Dr Ch'en Wen-chieh, Assistant Director-General.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a report ¹ 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. The Director-General 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.

In October 1976, an informal consultation was convened in Geneva to advise the Director-General on the selection of essential drugs corresponding to health needs, keeping in mind the situation of developing countries where the main objective was to extend the primary health care coverage of the population. The report of this consultation ² was circulated for comments to the WHO Regional Offices, health adminis-

¹ WHO Official Records, No. 226, 1975, Annex 13, pp. 96-110.

² Unpublished WHO document DPM/76.1.

trators, experts and nongovernmental organizations in official relations with WHO. The comments received were analysed and made available to assist the Expert Committee in its deliberations. In addition, the following guidelines were proposed to the Expert Committee :

1. The extent to which countries implement schemes or establish lists of essential drugs is a national policy decision of each country.

2. As far as health services in developing countries are concerned, the organized procurement and use of essential drugs have many advantages in terms of economy and effectiveness. However, the concept of “essential drug lists” must accommodate a variety of local situations if the lists are ever to meet the real health needs of the majority of the population.

3. There are convincing justifications for WHO to propose “model” or “guiding” lists of essential drugs as a contribution to solving the problems of those Member States whose health needs far exceed their resources and which may find it difficult to initiate such an endeavour on their own.

4. Such “guiding” or “model” lists should be understood as a tentative identification of a “common core” of basic needs which has universal relevance and applicability. The further local needs move away from the core, the more the health authorities or specific sectors of the health services will have to adjust the lists. Therefore, any list proposed by WHO should set out to indicate priorities in drug needs, with the full understanding that exclusion does not imply rejection. A list of essential drugs does not imply that no other drugs are useful, but simply that in a given situation these drugs are the most needed for the health care of the majority of the population and, therefore, should be available at all times in adequate amounts and in the proper dosage forms.

5. The selection of essential drugs is a continuing process, taking into account changing priorities for public health action and epidemiological conditions, as well as progress in pharmacological and pharmaceutical knowledge. It should be accompanied by a concomitant effort in education, training and information of health personnel in the proper use of the drugs.

6. Finally, the WHO programme on essential drugs should furnish a focus for organized and systematic investigation of this approach.

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