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Press Release EURO/10/04 Budapest, 25 June 2004

Newsflash (see box below). There is no place like home, or is there?

A new WHO study identifies the main environmental risks to children's health in the home.

European ministers of health and of environment and other high-ranking delegates from the WHO European Region today unanimously committed themselves to a set of specific actions to ensure a better future for the children of the WHO European Region. In the Children's Environment and Health Action Plan for Europe (CEHAPE) and the Conference declaration, adopted at the closing of the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health in Budapest, Hungary, ministers agreed on a series of concrete measures to reduce the impact on children's health of air pollution, water, chemicals and injuries, which account for one third of all deaths and diseases in the group aged 0-19 years.

The Budapest Conference has registered the highest attendance ever of countries' delegations since the start of the environment and health process in 1989, with 50 of the 52 countries in the Region participating and more than 40 ministers attending. Signing the documents on behalf of all European ministers were Dr Mihály Kucskányi, Minister of Health, Social and Family Affairs of Hungary and Chairman of the Conference; Dr Miklós Persönyi, Minister of Environment and Water of Hungary; and Dr Marc Danzon, WHO Regional Director for Europe. Ms Margot Wallström, European Commissioner for the Environment, and Mr Pavel Telicka, Member of the European Commission, endorsed these commitments on behalf of the European Union (EU).

"Tomorrow's children will be our judges," says Dr Marc Danzon, WHO Regional Director for Europe. "The care we have taken today in crafting these policy options is the legacy of European leadership in health and environment, and the further efforts needed to shepherd these recommendations into national and regional and global realities will be our testing ground. Success will be measured by a fairer, healthier and safer future for our children."

Acknowledging that marked differences across the Region and across age groups indicate the need for targeted action in specific countries, regions or populations, the ministers called for national plans to be developed by 2007. A set of actions was elaborated from which Member States and local authorities can select the most appropriate, with an emphasis on prevention strategies as the most cost-effective. The table of child-specific actions on environment and health complements and expands the CEHAPE, covering up to 15 risk factors.

The objective of these measures is to preserve and improve the environments where children live, study and play, by such means as:

- limiting the access of motor vehicles, especially those using diesel fuel, to school zones;
- establishing monitoring and smog alert systems in cities;
- banning smoking in public places, especially schools and health facilities;
- ensuring disposal of wastewater away from schools and recreational areas, including public beaches;
- monitoring the chemical contaminants of water and soil most hazardous to children; and
- enacting and enforcing legislation on the lead content of petrol and building materials and on

exposure to hazardous chemicals in toys.

Carrying out these actions requires improved cooperation between the health, environment and other sectors, as well as consolidation and expansion of WHO's cooperation with the enlarged European Commission.

"The Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health has agreed an impressive range of actions and commitments to address key environmental factors influencing the state of health of Europeans, with a specific focus on children," notes Mr Pavel Telicka, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection. "The European Commission has taken an active role in this Conference and is committed to working closely with its member states and with international organizations, in particular the World Health Organization, to achieve the Budapest goals. We know today that environmental factors have a major influence on the occurrence of key diseases, and it is our common responsibility to tackle these health challenges."

"Promoting a healthy environment for our children is a major task and I am glad that it has been the focus of the discussions here in Budapest. But it is a challenge that requires cooperation from all parties involved, and I trust that the CEHAPE and the EU Environment and Health Action Plan will jointly support each other in meeting our common goals of promoting a more 'child-friendly' environment and taking another step along the road to sustainable development. We must never forget that what is good for our children is good for society as a whole," concludes Ms Margot Wallström, European Commissioner for the Environment.

Recognizing the contribution of ministerial conferences on environment and health to the exchange of information and the establishment of multilateral partnerships, Europe's ministers have called for a fifth such conference for 2009, with the support of a new European Environment and Health Committee with a renewed and extended mandate.

Newsflash

There is no place like home, or is there? A new WHO study¹ identifies environmental risks to children's health in the home.

According to WHO scientists, in a report presented today in Budapest, the home setting, where European infants and young children spend up to 90% of their time, affects their health in many ways. The study, a large analysis and review of European housing and health status, took place in eight cities in different parts of the WHO European Region: Angers (France), Bonn (Germany), Bratislava (Slovakia), Budapest (Hungary), Ferreira do Alentejo (Portugal), Forl'm (Italy), Geneva (Switzerland) and Vilnius (Lithuania). Osh (Kyrgyzstan) joined later. In these cities, 3400 dwellings were surveyed and more than 8500 inhabitants filled out an environmental health questionnaire. The entire study will be released in September 2004.

According to the report, while the home is usually considered the safest place for children, it can host a variety of harmful environmental factors, including mould, noise, environmental tobacco smoke (ETS), household solid fuel combustion, unsafe water, lead and accidents. Selected findings from the study include the following.

- Damp conditions nurture the growth of mould, which affects children's respiratory diseases. A concentration of 10 µg/g house dust mites in the mattress increases fivefold the risk for children with two allergic parents of becoming asthmatic before the age of 11. Up to 50% of asthmatic children have symptoms triggered by cats and dogs.
- ETS, indoor solid-fuel combustion, humidity, dust mites and dander from pet animals represent major threats to the air children breathe. In the WHO European Region, over 50 000 children aged 0-4 years are estimated to die each year from acute lower respiratory infections due to indoor

pollution. Solid fuel use represents the largest source of indoor air pollution in the Region as a whole, accounting for 10 000 deaths in the same age group.

- The quality of sleep is associated with health status. Children whose sleep is disturbed by noise have 120% more chance of suffering from migraine than non-exposed children, and more than 90% more chance of suffering from respiratory disorders.
- Of the children in the population surveyed in the study's eight cities, 1% had no access to water at home, and 12% had no hot water at home. Although these percentages vary throughout the Region, in no city surveyed did all children have access to hot water in their dwellings.
- One of the most severe threats to children's health is lead poisoning; in old dwellings, lead is found in paint or solder for pipes. The banning of leaded petrol has been the most effective measure to reduce the number of children with lead concentrations in the blood above 10 µg/dl from 88.2% in 1976-1980 to 2.2% in 1999-2000 in some countries. To address the problem fully, however, this measure should be applied throughout the Region.
- Accidents are the primary cause of death of children aged 5-15 years, and the home is one of the places where they are exposed to risks of injury, many of which are preventable.
- Of the children surveyed, 20% declared that they did not have enough space for recreation around their homes. This may have direct consequences on amounts of physical activity.

Further information on the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health

(<http://www.euro.who.int/budapest2004>) and WHO's work on noise and housing

(<http://www.euro.who.int/Housing>) is available on the WHO Regional Office for Europe web site and from the experts listed below.

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¹ Preliminary results were published in 2003 (Bonney XR, Braubach M, Moissonnier B, et al. Housing and health in Europe: preliminary results of a pan-European study. American Journal of Public Health, 2003, 93:1559-1563).

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