
Director's Letter



CHOLERA'S LESSON: THE NEED TO INVEST IN HEALTH

Until cholera broke out in Peru last year, there had been no epidemics of that disease in Latin America or the Caribbean for almost a century. Yet since January 1991 it has invaded 19 countries, causing over 600,000 cases and more than 6,000 deaths. This dreadful situation should not come as a surprise. Cholera spreads, becomes epidemic, and finally becomes endemic when people live in substandard environmental conditions without access to safe drinking water or basic sanitation services and when health services are not equipped to respond adequately to the needs of the population at risk—conditions that are all too prevalent in this Region. Cholera has sounded an alarm to the appalling inadequacies and inequalities that exist in the provision of water supply, sanitation, and health care.

Remarkably, the cholera epidemic has led to a decrease in overall mortality from diarrheal diseases in several countries thanks to the extraordinary emergency response mounted to combat the epidemic. Still, hundreds of thousands of people in the Americas die each year from diarrheal diseases and other causes that are preventable with existing, low-cost technology. These numbers weigh heavily on the conscience of all of us who work for health and life, but in general they have not attacked the collective political and social conscience of societies and governments. The problem has always been there; cholera made it manifest.

Projections show that the toll of preventable deaths will skyrocket to two million by the year 2000 unless a firm political commitment is made to reverse the deterioration of infrastructure and to supply basic services to those who lack them. In the wake of the cholera shockwave, the countries have called for the formulation of a plan for long-term investment to address these needs on a regional scale. A proposal for this plan has been developed by PAHO in close consultation with the Governments and other cooperation agencies. During the period 1993–2004, the plan proposes to invest US\$216.7 billion to rehabilitate and extend environmental sanitation services and health care, as well as strengthen institutions, develop science and technology, and enhance other relevant areas. The Regional Plan for Investment in Health and the Environment represents a strategy for mobilizing resources to correct existing deficiencies, a frame of reference within which the countries and international cooperation organizations can prepare their own plans, and a process that will extend beyond the 12-year time frame to become a permanent commitment to reform and equity.

The amount of money involved may seem beyond the means of countries emerging from a decade of economic crisis. But in reality it represents only slightly more than 1% of the gross domestic product of Latin America and the Caribbean and will be financed from both internal and external sources. The cholera epidemic demonstrates the price of not having made this investment sooner. Clearly, the price for further delay would be even higher.



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