

Federation of Anti-Leprosy Associations (ILEP), said that while the elimination strategy had been effective in reducing prevalence in the short term, “it was based on unsustainable vertical approaches to leprosy control,” and that it was important to move beyond elimination now that a new WHO strategy for reducing the leprosy burden and sustaining leprosy control activities was in place.

Four key elements must be pursued to further reduce the leprosy burden, he said:

- sustaining leprosy services and maintaining diagnostic and treatment skills;
- using new case detection and treatment completion rates as indicators;
- achieving quality targets that reflect the timeliness of detection (new cases with grade II disability) and the quality of patient management (treatment completion rates);
- increasing efforts to prevent disability, assist rehabilitation and fight against stigma

Alluding to efforts by certain countries to achieve elimination at the sub-national level, ILEP’s president said, “The elimination strategy has been extremely successful. But its pursuit at sub-national level risks becoming counter-productive, will disturb field workers, and distort global reporting, making it difficult to interpret current data.”

Leprosy FACT

- Novartis has established a plant in India for the production of MDT. The first shipments are expected in the 3rd quarter of 2006.

DRUG SECURITY

Drugs used to treat leprosy are being provided free of charge by the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development. Dr. Klaus M. Leisinger, the foundation’s president, noted there had been a lot of skepticism initially as to whether the elimination goal was a realistic one.

“My comment four years ago, which is still valid today, was that asking if one can eliminate leprosy is like asking if there is life after death. We will not know until we get there,” he said. “But we do know that the only way to cure leprosy and reduce the disease burden is to detect all patients and treat them with MDT. [T]his is the essence of the elimination strategy.”

Describing leprosy elimination as a major public health success story, he said it proves that “with the necessary political will on all sides, the right strategy and appropriate tools one can move mountains.”

The effort to realize a world without leprosy will require a concerted effort to sustain the gains made so far, he said. “We must retain a sense of urgency as we only have a small

window of opportunity to do so in view of other pressing health problems.”

“Sometimes I worry that we have wasted a lot of time and energy in a rather academic discussions around ‘elimination’. But let us not look back. Diverting energy and time to such discussion would have a high price tag attached — one that is not paid by us — but by the patients and their communities. Irrespective of whether one believes in elimination or not, or whether its focus is at national or sub-national level, the strategy remains the same — to provide patients and communities with easy and uninterrupted access to diagnosis and treatment.”

“With political will, the right strategy and appropriate tools, one can move mountains.”

EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

In drawing the meeting to a close, Dr. Noorden directed participants’ attention to a poster on neglected diseases near the WHO library, bearing the words “Hidden successes and emerging opportunities.”

It was particularly appropriate for leprosy, he said, because ‘hidden successes’ suggests how the enormous achievements that have been made sometimes go unrecognized, while ‘emerging opportunities’ reflects the growing numbers of people now talking about moving from elimination to eradication.

He concluded with the following observations:

- all leprosy-endemic countries are strongly committed to the goal of leprosy elimination and would like to proceed to elimination at the local level. There is also a strong urge to move toward leprosy eradication;
- countries are increasing the focus on rehabilitation, and on fighting the social problems of stigma and discrimination;
- the human rights issue is growing in importance, and needs to be addressed more vigorously still;
- the positive aspects of leprosy work — in particular, free drug supply — need to be protected into the future;
- the best tribute to the late Dr. Lee will be to realize his wish to create a world free from leprosy and leprosy-related problems. ■