

## WHO recognises child abuse as a major problem

Child abuse has become a major public-health problem worldwide, according to WHO. A recent estimate from WHO shows that 40 million children aged 0–14 years are abused, neglected, and require health and social care. Studies done in 19 countries have reported prevalence for sexual abuse of 7–34% among girls and 3–29% among boys.

The burden of ill health caused by abuse is staggering in terms of cost and socioeconomic development. One study showed that the lifetime cost for the estimated 2 million children

abused in the USA in 1996 is about to be US\$12.4 billion.



Bubbles

### The innocent must be protected

at WHO headquarters (Geneva, Switzerland; March 29–31). 24 experts from around the world presented findings at the meeting, showing how child abuse is a problem in both developed and developing countries.

Some countries have started training programmes in parenting skills done in a supportive environment by nurses or community-health workers. Such programmes, which have shown that the prevalence of child abuse can be reduced, work best if they are child-centred, family-focused, and community-based.

### International recommendations

- Development of worldwide data collection on abuse
- Sharing of interventions and best practices for prevention
- Continuing evaluation and research on prevention
- Development of national programmes for prevention and provision of social support for children and families

## Journalist's rape adds to rising rape statistics

A journalist's personal account in the South African media on April 9 of her rape earlier this month has rekindled anger at the country's alarming rape statistics.

According to South African Police Services, 23 374 rapes were reported in the first 6 months of 1998 (52.8 per 100 000). However, rape is an under-reported crime and police estimate that only 1 in 35 incidences is reported. Based on this estimate, 58 4350 rapes would have occurred in the first half of last year, a rate of 3228 a day.

The journalist's story printed in the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper attempts to raise awareness about the "poor" response by police, health services, and the criminal-justice system to endemic violence against women and children.

About 1800 people contract HIV daily in South Africa and the high incidence of violent rape is likely to put many women and children at

risk of infection. In spite of this, the health ministry will not allow rape survivors access to free AZT (zidovudine) or triple therapy. There is also a shocking upsurge in the rape of girls under 8 years of age, which researchers believe could be because of the popular myth that sex with virgins cures AIDS.

Rape Crisis says health workers generally fail to inform survivors of the risk of HIV infection. There is very little information on how to get treatment for HIV even if patients are prepared to pay for it. There is also no national policy on the treatment of rape survivors and it is the luck-of-the-draw for many as to how they will be treated by district surgeons. Rape Crisis commented there were relatively few convictions for rape and that women complained bitterly of feeling victimised by the courts.

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## News in Brief

**Millennium cover dispute** Irish hospitals face a strike by junior doctors during the millennium holiday period. Controversy has erupted over the decision to extend junior doctors' normal 6-month contracts, due to end in December, into January to provide extra cover during the festivities. The Irish Medical Organisation said the extension—introduced without negotiation—will play havoc with the work plans and training of junior doctors.

**Cancer in Canada** Cancer is taking its primary toll on Canadians over 60 years of age, according to new projections of the incidence of the disease within the Canadian population. About 70% of new cancers and 80% of cancer deaths will occur in the over 60s age groups, according to the Canadian Cancer Society's 1999 statistics. The report estimates there will be 129 300 new cases of cancer; 63 400 more cancer deaths this year; and 20 500 Canadians will be diagnosed with lung cancer, of which 17 400 are projected to die.

### SNP mapping collaboration

A 2-year, US\$45-million initiative to create a high-quality map of single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs), genetic markers, was launched by the SNP consortium on April 15. The consortium is being funded by the Wellcome Trust and ten pharmaceutical companies. The study will involve several academic centres from around the world. Scientists believe SNPs can help pinpoint the genetic differences that predispose some but not others to diseases such as cancer. The map is also expected to be useful in developing diagnostic tests, and creating "personalised" medicines.

**Kevorkian trial update** Jack Kevorkian was sentenced to 10–25 years in prison on April 13 for second-degree murder of a terminally-ill man. Judge Jessica Cooper followed the prosecutor's recommendation of a stiff jail term for Kevorkian, but refrained from imposing the maximum of life in prison. Cooper also sentenced Kevorkian—who will be eligible for parole in about 6 years—to 3–7 years for delivering a controlled