

The WHO report “Preventing Chronic Diseases: a vital investment” and us

Prof. Alfredo Morabia, MD, and Prof. Thomas Abel, PhD are Editors-in-Chief of SPM – International Journal of Public Health

This new report (Fig. 1) makes the case for urgent action to halt and turn back the growing threat of chronic diseases. The full report and an overview pamphlet translated in several languages are available on the WHO website (http://www.who.int/chp/chronic_disease_report/contents/en/index.html). This is a timely and very important document, nicely presented that describes risk factors and burden of chronic disease globally, reviews effective, feasible and evidence-based interventions for prevention and control of chronic diseases, provides practical suggestions for how countries can implement these interventions and outlines a public health approach to formulate and implement effective chronic disease policy and presents interventions. The pamphlet is very didactic, debunks wrong ideas about chronic diseases and describes poignant examples of the concrete implications of chronic diseases in developing countries. The whole document is a great reading and should be known to everyone involved in public health. But there is a special domain in which the report is especially relevant to SPM: The emphasis on risk factor surveillance. The report refers to WHO STEPwise approach to Surveillance (STEPS) which has been described in a previous issue of SPM ([Strong and Bonita, 2004] and states that:

“Although some disease burden information may be available, the distribution of risk factors among the population is the key information required by countries in their planning of prevention and control programmes. This information predicts the future burden of disease; it must then be synthesized and disseminated in a way that successfully argues the case for the adoption of relevant policies” (p. 126)

We would add that risk factors surveillance provides an early measurement of the impact of policies on population health: the incidence of coronary heart disease, of cancer or of diabetes may still be on the rise long after their risk factors, such as obesity, hyperlipemia and sedentarity have started to regress.

One of the aims of SPM is to contribute to the process of synthesis and dissemination of risk factor surveillance data. It is in this purpose that we have created the section on International Comparison of Health Determinants, in which we invite the contributors to present their data in a standardized format and

compare them with previous reports. This section could be used more than it has been until now. We also view the SPM section Hints and Kinks as a place where people daily involved with risk factor surveillance can share their experience and disseminate their ways of improving the process. We would like to receive more papers for these two sections. The need for surveillance data is enormous and the methodological obstacles in collecting them, standardizing or homogenizing them on regional, national and global scales are Herculean. So what, Hercules did it after all.

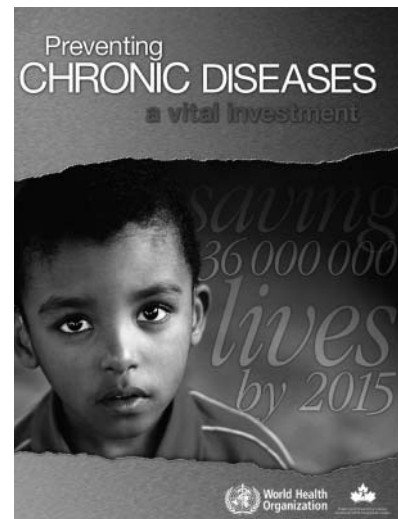


Figure 1 Front cover of the WHO report

Alfredo Morabia and Thomas Abel

References

Strong KL, Bonita R (2004). Investing in surveillance: a fundamental tool of public health. *Soz Präventiv Med* 49: 269–75.