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# The use of essential drugs

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Fourth report of the WHO  
Expert Committee

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Geneva, 27-30 November 1989

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# THE USE OF ESSENTIAL DRUGS

## Fourth report of the WHO Expert Committee

The WHO Expert Committee on the Use of Essential Drugs met in Geneva from 27 to 30 November 1989. The meeting was opened on behalf of the Director-General by Dr Hu Ching-Li, Assistant Director-General, who emphasized that the concept of essential drugs is fundamental both to WHO's revised drug strategy,<sup>1</sup> as endorsed by the World Health Assembly in resolution WHA39.27 in 1986,<sup>2</sup> and to the development of comprehensive national drug policies. Regular updating of WHO's Model List of Essential Drugs sustains the momentum of the revised drug strategy and is a basic element of the validated information required by most of WHO's Member States for optimal rationalization of drug procurement and supply.

The Expert Committee decided to prepare its report as a self-contained document and to incorporate into it parts of the previous report<sup>3</sup> that require no modification or merely bringing up to date. The sixth list will be found in section 13 of this report, and explanations of the changes in section 14.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In a report<sup>4</sup> to the Twenty-eighth World Health Assembly in 1975, the Director-General reviewed the main drug problems facing the developing countries and outlined possible new drug policies. The Director-General also referred to the experience gained in some countries where schemes of basic or essential drugs had been implemented. Such schemes were intended to extend the accessibility of the most necessary drugs to populations whose basic health needs could not be met by the existing supply system. The Director-General pointed out that the selection of these essential drugs would

<sup>1</sup> WHO document WHA39/1986/REC/1, Annex 5, pp. 93–101.

<sup>2</sup> *Handbook of resolutions and decisions of the World Health Assembly and Executive Board, Volume III, 1985–1989*, 2nd ed. Geneva, World Health Organization, 1990, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> WHO Technical Report Series, No. 770, 1988.

<sup>4</sup> WHO Official Records, No. 226, 1975, Annex 13, pp. 96–110.

depend on the health needs and on the structure and development of the health services of each country. Lists of essential drugs should be drawn up locally, and periodically updated, with the advice of experts in public health, medicine, pharmacology, pharmacy, and drug management. He also considered that adequate information on the properties, indications, and use of the drugs listed should be provided. By resolution WHA28.66,<sup>1</sup> the Health Assembly requested the Director-General to implement the proposals contained in his report and, in particular, to advise Member States on the selection and procurement, at reasonable cost, of essential drugs of established quality corresponding to their national health needs.

Following wide consultation, an initial model list of essential drugs was included in the first report of the Expert Committee on the Selection of Essential Drugs.<sup>2</sup> This was subsequently revised and updated in four further reports.<sup>3-6</sup>

In undertaking a further review of the list, the present Expert Committee has been guided throughout by the following statement contained in the previous reports:

Because of the great differences between countries, the preparation of a drug list of uniform, general applicability is not feasible or possible. Therefore, each country has the direct responsibility of evaluating and adopting a list of essential drugs, according to its own policy in the field of health.

The list of essential drugs based on the guidelines put forward in this report is a model which can furnish a basis for countries to identify their own priorities and to make their own selection.

The Committee also draws attention to the following guidelines set out in the initial report:

(1) The extent to which countries implement schemes or establish lists of essential drugs is a national policy decision of each country.

(2) As far as health services in developing countries are concerned, the organized procurement and use of essential drugs have many

<sup>1</sup> *Handbook of resolutions and decisions of the World Health Assembly and Executive Board, Volume II, 1973-1984*. Geneva, World Health Organization, 1985, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> WHO Technical Report Series, No. 615, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> WHO Technical Report Series, No. 641, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> WHO Technical Report Series, No. 685, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> WHO Technical Report Series, No. 722, 1985.

<sup>6</sup> WHO Technical Report Series, No. 770, 1988.

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