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WORK OF WHO IN HEALTH STATISTICS

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Health Statistics is one of the major technical activities  
World Health Organization

The work is carried out in the Division of Health Statistics of Headquarters where there are four technical units, and also in the six regions of the Organization. Each regional office has a statistical adviser and a statistical unit.

The Health Statistics programme has two broad objectives :

- 1) to encourage and assist countries to establish good health statistical systems in their own national health services;
- 2) to help other technical units of WHO to use sound statistical methods.

The first objective of encouraging and assisting countries to set up good health statistical systems is achieved partly in Headquarters and partly in the regions. The first step is to try to develop general international principles and standards for the establishment and operation of health statistical services. There is a set of regulations called the "WHO Nomenclature Regulations" which deal with the basic principles regarding the compilation and publication of health statistics and which are used as a guide to countries.

Another example of this kind of activity is the work WHO carries out in connexion with the International Classification of Diseases. The ICD came into existence in 1893 and in 1948 WHO assumed responsibility for the periodic revisions of the classification. This is now one of the major activities of the unit of Development of Health Statistical Services. The revision takes place every ten years and the next will be in 1965. The ICD is nowadays widely used throughout the world for the tabulation of mortality and morbidity statistics. It is published in three official languages, French, English and Spanish but versions exist in many other languages, including Arabic.

Another activity in connexion with the improvement of national statistics is the collection and publication of international health statistics and the unit of Dissemination of Statistical Information is entirely concerned with this task. It prepares a very large annual Epidemiological and Vital Statistics Report and a small monthly report, the monthly report giving more up-to-date figures than the annual report. The annual report includes vital statistics and causes of death, cases and deaths from infectious diseases and statistics of health personnel and hospital establishments in different countries. It is a very useful source of information, presented in a series of uniform tables. This does not mean that the figures for the various countries are completely comparable. Despite the fact that they may use the same classification there are difficulties of interpretation because of the different ways countries collect and publish their national data. It is the task of DSI to look into these sources of differences and to try to reduce them so that the statistics can be better used. While there is a large amount of information available from a number of countries, there is a partial lack of information from others and many developing countries are hardly able to produce any useful statistics at all. WHO is endeavouring to help and persuade the governments concerned to compile the statistical information that is needed, not simply in order to have them published by WHO, but primarily to enable them to know better what the health situation is in their own countries.

Another function of WHO is concerned with national committees on vital and health statistics. It has been the policy of WHO to encourage countries to set up national committees on vital and health statistics so as to co-ordinate national statistical activities. In order to exchange information between countries they are asked to inform WHO about what their national committees are doing. National committees are apparently working quite well in some countries but not in others, and WHO is still a little uncertain how far it ought to go in pressing

for national committees everywhere. Much depends on the particular situation in each country. In one a national committee may be valuable, in another, almost useless.

In the regional offices the Regional Statistical Advisers have the responsibility of visiting countries in order to give advice on how to overcome difficulties and improve statistical services. They may set up national projects or send consultants to help the national authorities to develop better systems or modify the existing ones according to their particular needs. A feature of WHO projects is the training of national counterparts appointed by the government, to enable them to carry on with the work initiated.

The other side of the work of the Division of Health Statistics is to help WHO itself to use sound statistical methods. There are two headquarters units engaged full time in helping other WHO units with their statistical problems and the Regional Statistical Advisers also have an important share in this task.

The staff of the unit of Health Statistical Methodology are mathematical statisticians who have specialized in health statistics. The unit deals especially with communicable disease problems, for instance the statistical planning of therapeutic or prophylactic trials and the assessment of the results of these trials and the planning of prevalence surveys of various diseases such as yaws, bilharziasis and leprosy. In addition to giving advice, this unit has mechanical equipment for the processing of data. Occasionally also the unit hires time on an electronic computer when special calculations are needed.

The unit of Epidemiological Studies gives advice on how epidemiological studies should be done but does not carry out epidemiological studies itself. Its main fields of interest are tuberculosis, cancer, cardiovascular diseases and mental diseases. It advises on methodological aspects of field surveys and also on epidemiological problems arising in connexion with public health services, organization of medical care, and so on.

Another activity in the field of health statistics is the holding of expert committee meetings. WHO has a series of expert panels for various subjects and from time to time it holds meetings on selected topics. Every one or two years an expert committee meeting deals with important problems in the field of health statistics. The last two meetings have dealt respectively with health surveys and with hospital statistics.

In addition to the expert committee meetings, there are conferences on health statistics, mainly within the regions. Two years ago, for instance, the Regional Office for Europe convened a meeting on mortality statistics; last year it held a meeting about the role of national committees in European countries and this year a meeting took place in Vienna about morbidity statistics. The Regional Office for the Western Pacific will convene a meeting in Manila towards the end of this year on health surveys and reporting. The Regional Office for South East Asia held a conference last year on hospital statistics. These conferences have a very valuable function in bringing together people specialized in different aspects of statistics, giving stimulus and encouragement to countries to improve their statistical services, and acquainting WHO with their particular problems.

The last activity to mention is the training of personnel. WHO is trying to help countries with the training of statistical personnel, in the way of granting fellowships to attend courses of instruction in schools of public health. Fellows are also given the opportunity to visit countries to study the methods employed in various national statistical offices.

A number of training seminars have been organized within the regions. For example, in the Western Pacific region, a seminar was held three years ago with the objective of familiarizing people working in the fields of vital and health statistics with recent international developments. Last year another training seminar was organized in the South Pacific area for more junior personnel.

In addition to arranging fellowships and seminars, WHO also assists in the training of statistical personnel by publishing instructional manuals, such as the Manual on Hospital Morbidity Statistics that has recently been issued in provisional form.