Press Releases/Information Notes

Children suffer most from the effects of Ozone Depletion - 16 September 2003

World Ozone Day: 16 September

WHO, UNEP and other Partners Launch New Educational Products to Address the Public Health Danger

GENEVA/PARIS, 16 September 2003 - Every year, there are between two and three million new cases of non-melanoma skin cancers and more than 130,000 new melanoma skin cancer cases worldwide. An estimated 66 000 deaths occur annually from melanoma and other skin cancers.

The cause of many of these skin cancers is ultraviolet radiation (UV) from the sun and children, who are both most vulnerable and most exposed, are disproportionately affected. In response to the problem, the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and other partners in the Intersun Project are launching a set of new educational materials today. The new package will help children, their families and educators protect children from the risks of developing malignant and non-malignant skin cancers, cataracts and other UV-caused conditions. .The materials support recommendations made in "Sun Protection, An Essential Element of Health-Promoting Schools", a part of the WHO Information Series on School Health.

"As ozone depletion becomes more marked and as people around the world engage more in sun-seeking behaviour, the risk of developing health complications from over-exposure to UV radiation is becoming a substantial public health concern," said WHO Director General Dr Lee Jong-wook at WHO's Geneva, Switzerland Headquarters.

"Recent scientific findings have shown that the ozone layer is on the road to recovery, but we must remain vigilant and more needs to be done before we can say that the problem is solved for good," said Klaus Toepfer, UNEP's Executive Director. "The phase-out of the ozone depleting pesticide Methyl Bromide, combating the illegal trade in CFCs and full implementation of the Montreal Protocol in developing countries are all issues that need to be tackled. Only then can we say that the sky above our heads will be safe for our children and their children to come."

"UV radiation is of particular concern because people are often unaware of the health risks. The effects of exposure often do not appear until many years later and over-exposure to the sun poses a risk to all populations, not just fair-skinned ones," said Dr Mike Repacholi, Coordinator of WHO's Radiation and Environmental Health Unit.

To help people around the world become more aware of the risks from exposure to UV radiation, and to take the measures to prevent over-exposure, WHO's Intersun Project is today launching a School Sun Protection Package. The Package comprises three booklets: a guide for schools and teachers on why and how to develop effective sun education programmes, practical teaching materials for primary school students, and evaluation materials to assess the effectiveness of primary school sun-education programmes.

"We know that by reducing over-exposure of children and adolescents to the sun, we can substantially reduce the risk of contracting skin cancers, cataracts and other conditions which might only appear much later in life. As a significant part of a person's lifetime exposure to UV comes before the age of 18 , it is obvious that educating children and young people about the dangers of UV exposure is key to preventing the consequences of this, and school programmes have been shown to be the most effective way of reaching and educating children," said Dr Lee.

"While most of the known melanomas included in the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) statistics occur in the industrialized world, this is not necessarily because only fair-skinned populations are affected by UV radiation. Given adequate reporting mechanisms,

we would expect to see many more melanoma cases originating in developing countries. Moreover cataract susceptibility has nothing to do with the skin type and people living close to the equator are most likely to be affected," added Dr Repacholi.

Cataracts are responsible for more than 8 million Disability-Adjusted Life Years worldwide ; a comparative risk assessment to estimate the burden of disease attributable to UV radiation is currently under way to try and estimate how many of these cataracts are attributable to sun exposure.

Intersun is a joint project sponsored by WHO, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Meteorological Organization and the International Commission for Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (see web site: http://www.who.int/uv/). The School Sun Protection Package documents and further information on INTERSUN are available at http://www.who.int/uv/

The new educational materials are being launched on the occasion of the International Day for the Preservation of the Ozone Layer, which has as its theme this year: "Save O3ur Sky: There is a Hole Lot More to Do for Our Children". More information about this year's Ozone Day is available from the Ozone Secretariat at http://www.unep.org/ozone/ozone_day2003/ and from UNEP's OzonAction team in Paris at http://www.uneptie.org/ozonaction/ which also includes additional resources for raising awareness among children.

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