

October 2009 action:

Global Handwashing Day: clean hands save lives

RESULTS
the power to end poverty

TAKE ACTION:

1. Write a letter to the editor drawing attention to the importance of handwashing with soap to reduce the incidence of diarrhoea and pneumonia, the two biggest killers of children under 5 globally, to mark Global Handwashing Day on the 15th October.
2. Prepare for November's action. In November we will be visiting local community groups or schools to widen awareness of the links between sanitation and child survival, and get more people involved in taking action. This month you will need to: identify and make contact with a local community group or school to whom you can go to speak about the issue.

Introduction

The two leading killers of children under 5 in the world are pneumonia and diarrhoeal disease. Combined, they account for approximately 3.5 million child deaths each year. That's more than the total UK under-5 population wiped out each year.

Pneumonia is the leading killer of children in the world. Pneumonia kills more than any other disease; in fact even more than AIDS, malaria and measles combined. More than 2 million children die each year from this preventable illness. Diarrhoeal disease is the second leading killer of children. An astounding 1.5 million children die from diarrheal disease each year. Poor water, sanitation and hygiene are the cause of 88% of all diarrhoeal deaths.

Both of these leading killers are preventable and treatable. Yet millions die because they live in impoverished, over-crowded conditions that are a breeding ground for bacteria and disease. They lack access to the basic necessities of life, and health interventions that we take for granted.

Handwashing with soap

There are solutions. According to UNICEF, simple hand washing with soap can curb the incidence of pneumonia by up to 30% in children, because hand washing helps to prevent the spread of bacteria and viruses that cause pneumonia. Hand-washing, especially after defecating and before food preparation or eating, is even more effective with respect to preventing diarrhoeal disease; it can reduce child morbidity caused by diarrhoea by an astounding 44%. It is estimated that universal handwashing with soap could save over a million lives every year.

Hygiene promotion, such as encouraging handwashing with soap, is also the most cost-effective of all health

interventions – costing just \$3 per Disability-Adjusted Life-Year¹ saved, according to the World Bank.

Unfortunately hand washing with soap is not a common practice for many people in the developing world (and is under-used in much of the developed world too). Although people around the world wash their hands with water, very few wash their hands with soap at critical moments (for example, after using the toilet, while cleaning a child, and before handling food).

The soap itself is not expensive – in fact the vast majority even of poor households already have soap in their homes. Research in periurban (areas surrounding cities) and rural areas found, for instance, that soap was present in 95 percent of households in Uganda, 97 percent of households in Kenya and 100 percent of households in Peru. The problem is that soap is rarely used for handwashing. Laundry, bathing and washing dishes are seen as the priorities for soap use. Access to sufficient water for handwashing (especially in schools) can be more of an issue, but innovative solutions such as 'tippy-taps' (see background sheet 2) can tackle this problem.

Behaviour change

The real challenge is to change the behaviour of people at home, at school and in the community. Ingraining hand washing as a habit drastically reduces and prevents the incidence of diarrhoeal disease and pneumonia. Hygiene promotion at the community level and in schools is essential in the quest to save lives.

There are many examples of good practice in this area. For example, in Ghana, a Public Private Partnership for

¹ A Disability-Adjusted Life-Year is a measure that combines years of life lost due to premature death and years of productive life lost due to time lived in states of less than full health.

the “Handwashing with Soap Programme” has resulted in a 41-62% increase in handwashing with soap before eating. Working with private sector partners (such as soap manufacturers), multi-media campaigns, community participation and facilitation, peer-to-peer education techniques, lifeskills-based hygiene lessons for school children, and the encouragement of children to demonstrate good hygiene to their families and communities can all help to reinforce the message.

What is the international community doing?

In May 2009 WaterAid released a report² which demonstrates that the international aid system is not responding to the causes of child mortality in a targeted way – specifically because it is largely overlooking diarrhoea as a key cause of child mortality and failing to integrate sanitation and hygiene promotion into health programmes.

The fourth Millennium Development Goal requires donor and developing nation governments to reduce the under-five mortality rate by two thirds by 2015. Despite some progress we remain a long way from this goal. To really tackle the issue we need comprehensive strengthening of health systems to address sanitation and hygiene promotion as well as curative approaches to diarrhoeal diseases and pneumonia.

What is the Department for International Development (DFID) doing?

In 2008 DFID committed to ‘actively searching for ways to integrate water and sanitation components into health and education programmes’. They gave the example of DFID’s multimillion pound programme in Sierra Leone, which links improved health outcomes with water and sanitation provision and the global hand washing project, run by the World Bank’s Water and Sanitation Program.

However, DFID continue to place too little emphasis on sanitation, and examples like the Sierra Leone programme are the exception rather than the norm. The share of UK aid going to sanitation remains very small; the most recent figures show that the UK is committing just 1.5% of its aid to sanitation and water.

² [‘Fatal Neglect: How health systems are failing to comprehensively address child mortality’](#), WaterAid, May 2009

An absolutely tiny percentage of aid to the sector goes toward hygiene promotion and education.

What should DFID do?

Where DFID are supporting governments through direct budget support or sector budget support they should be calling on the partner government to make spending decisions based on a proper analysis of disease burden and the cost-effectiveness of interventions, and encouraging the expansion of community hygiene education projects.. This would lead to higher priority for sanitation and hygiene promotion such as handwashing with soap.

Where DFID supports sanitation and water projects directly they should ensure that the funds target the interventions that have the biggest impact on the poorest, effectively saving children’s lives and improving living conditions. This would mean actively looking to support more hygiene promotion and sanitation projects in underserved communities.

What else can be done?

The health sector needs to advocate for sanitation and hygiene promotion. Health activists have been very successful in motivating donors to commit funds to diseases, and should use their skills to propel sanitation up the international agenda.

Taking action

On Thursday 15th October people around the world will be celebrating Global Handwashing Day, an international initiative to promote handwashing with soap.

Since the outbreak of H1N1 flu (swine flu), the government has been encouraging people to wash their hands to avoid the spread of the disease. This intervention is just as effective with the biggest killers of children: pneumonia and diarrhoea. **Write to your local or national newspaper using swine flu (or another relevant issue) as a hook, to call on the UK government to ensure greater priority around the world for handwashing with soap and other hygiene interventions to match their huge potential to save children’s lives.** Handwashing with soap is the most effective health intervention in the world, and should be central to global efforts to curb child deaths.