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WHO WELCOMES FIRST SIGNATORY AS IT OPENS PROCESS TO UNDERWRITE GOOD DRUG DONATION GUIDELINES

The Partnership for Quality Medical Donations (PQMD) has become the first umbrella organization, representing a number of US-based pharmaceutical companies and non-governmental organisations, to underwrite the World Health Organization's (WHO) *Interagency Guidelines for Drug Donations*. This represents a significant step forward in WHO's efforts to ensure that only those drugs which are needed by recipients (e.g., the authorities in disaster-struck countries) are donated.

"We welcome PQMD's endorsement of the *Guidelines*. The commitment of organizations like PQMD is essential if we are to ensure that only good drug donations are made. As more companies and organizations underwrite the *Guidelines*, there should be fewer and fewer examples of inappropriate drug donations," said Dr Jonathan Quick, Director of WHO's Essential Drug Programme.

The *Guidelines*, released on 3 September 1999 (see WHO Press Release 45; <http://www.who.int/inf-pr-1999/en/pr99-45.html>), were co-sponsored by 15 organizations(1). PQMD will now be added to the growing list of organizations pledging to donate only those drugs which have been requested by the recipient, to ensure that all drugs are properly labelled and accompanied by clear packing lists, and not to donate drugs which are close to or past their expiry date. WHO, for its part, will continue to track the quality of drug donations and provide feedback to those organizations which do not adhere to the *Guidelines*.

Other organizations have already signalled preparedness to underwrite the *Guidelines*. Those which do so, will be listed on <http://www.who.int/dap/edmguidelines.html>. Those wishing to be included are invited to contact dapmail@who.int.

"Good donations which fulfil recipient needs are welcomed and are to be encouraged. They save countless lives and alleviate human suffering. We would like to see the number and quantity of appropriate donations increase while eliminating inappropriate donations," added Dr Quick.

PQMD's adherence to the Guidelines is a big step in a needed direction, said Dr Quick. PQMD is comprised of six PVOs and ten pharmaceutical companies: AmeriCares, Catholic Medical Mission Board, Interchurch Medical Assistance, International AID, MAP International, Project Hope, Abbott Laboratories, Becton-Dickinson, Bristol-Myers Squibb Company, Johnson & Johnson, Eli Lilly and Company, Merck & Co., Inc, Pfizer Inc, Pharmacia & Upjohn, SmithKline Beecham and Wyeth-Ayerst Laboratories.

To improve the quality and appropriateness of donations, the revised *Guidelines* are being circulated to as wide an audience as possible and additional efforts will be directed at donors sending unhelpful donations. Donations that are perceived as unsatisfactory should be reported with details to dapmail@who.int. A standard reporting form will be made available. Only in the case of repeated shipments of unhelpful donations will names be published.

The *Guidelines for Drug Donations* continue to be urgently needed. In Turkey after the recent earthquake, and in recent crises in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo and elsewhere, 15%, 30% and, in some cases, up to 60% of drug donations were inappropriate because the drugs had expired, they were inadequately labelled, or simply unknown to local health providers. The result has been hundreds of tons of unusable drugs which now constitute an environmental hazard.

When the Guidelines are followed, however, donations do inestimable good. For example, in the recent crisis in the Southern Balkans, the humanitarian response from governments, NGOs and the private sector meant that standard kits of carefully selected essential drugs sufficient to meet the needs of 1.5 million people for three months were sent to Albania.

Good donations also fill other needs: making long-term disease elimination programmes possible and contributing to health system development, for example. Examples of long-term donation programmes include Merck & Co, Inc's Mectizan donations for the fights to eliminate river blindness and lymphatic filariasis; and SmithKline Beecham's donation of albendazole for lymphatic filariasis.

Drug donations as part of long-term development may be part of bilateral aid programmes between governments, from major aid agencies such DANIDA (the Danish International Development Agency), the Catholic Medical Mission Board (USA) and other non-governmental organizations which provide individual health care units. These agencies provide large quantities of helpful and appropriate donations and are usually in close contact with the recipients. National guidelines

have been issued or endorsed by the governments of 6 developed (donor) countries - Australia, Canada, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand and Norway – while in 14 recipient countries, the Government issued or endorsed national guidelines for drug donations: Armenia, Bolivia, Estonia, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kenya, Madagascar, Mali, Mongolia, Namibia, Niger, Peru, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

Intermediary organizations which distribute drugs they receive from pharmaceutical companies can also help, provided they select or solicit drugs which meet recipient needs. In comparison with agencies which buy drugs or with "produce-to-donate" programmes, these organizations obviously have less flexibility in the choice of drugs donated. They need to communicate with the recipient well in advance and must also be prepared to reject offers of unwanted and inappropriate drugs.

"Publicly underwriting and actively adhering to the Guidelines is the best way for donors to ensure that the drugs they give truly benefit the recipient," said Dr Quick.

1) Caritas Internationalis, International Committee of the Red Cross, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, International Pharmaceutical Federation, Médecins Sans Frontières, Oxfam, Pharmaciens Sans Frontières, UNAIDS, UNHCR, UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, the World Bank, the World Council of Churches, WHO.

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