

Preface

Children face the excitement of a changing world, with many opportunities and challenges; but they also encounter formidable barriers to their health, development and well-being in the form of environmental threats. During recent decades, new knowledge has emerged about the special vulnerability of children to environmental risks in the places where they live, learn and grow. Children's and adolescents' exposure to chemical, physical, and biological risks at home, in school, in the playground, at work and elsewhere deserves our immediate attention and needs to be recognized as an important threat to their development and survival. Action to reduce the risks is required at global, regional and national levels.

In 1999, a Task Force on Children's Environmental Health was set up by the World Health Organization (WHO). Its activities culminated at the International Conference on Children's Environmental Health: Hazards and Vulnerability, in March 2002, with a pledge to promote action enunciated in the Bangkok Statement. WHO was urged to "*incorporate children's environmental health into the training for health care providers and other professionals*". At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in September 2002, WHO called for a global movement to create healthy environments for children. The proposal of a global alliance was backed by many countries, as well as by representatives of non-governmental organizations, the private sector, academia and international organizations. This worldwide call to action was the first of its kind, recognizing children, both girls and boys, as the essence of sustainable development and binding nations together in the search for healthy and safe lives for children.

As one of the action steps towards the protection of children's health and environments, WHO has produced this resource manual for health care practitioners. The manual, inspired by the American Academy of Pediatrics *Handbook of pediatric environmental health* (1999 and 2003), is intended as an introductory resource tool for health care professionals around the world, and especially in developing countries, who aim to increase their knowledge and understanding of children and environmental health.

Health professionals in the "front line", dealing with children and adolescents, and interacting with their families and communities, are well positioned to recognize, investigate and help prevent environmentally related diseases. They are in a strategic position to collect data, undertake research, stimulate decision-makers to take action, and promote the education of family members and the general public. This resource manual will enable health care providers to play a proactive and preventive role and to assume their responsibilities, expanding their horizons in the area of paediatrics, family and community medicine.

While the design, content and compilation of the manual was coordinated by WHO, the chapters have been contributed by experts in the field of paediatric health and the environment. In most cases, the co-authors are from different parts of the world, sharing insights and expertise gained from their professions, research activities and personal experiences. Each chapter was reviewed by one or more experts in the field, as well as by WHO staff. Authors verified their sources, made available at the end of each chapter, to provide readers with additional sources of information. When possible, electronic access has been encouraged, by provision of World Wide Web sites. WHO also makes this publication available on its web site at www.who.int/ceh.

With deepest appreciation of the many professionals who freely contributed to this book in numerous ways, WHO is pleased to offer *Children's health and the environment* as part of a concerted effort to increase the health, happiness, and quality of life of our world's children.