Hypertension and the Year of the Snake

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At the First World Health Assembly in 1948, the delegates decided to mark the WHO foundation by designating April 7th as World Health Day. Every year since on April 7th 1950, when the first World Health day had the theme of “Know your Health Services” the ‘Day’ has been used to draw attention to priorities in global health. Now, World Health Day has become well established and each year the 193 countries who are members of the organisation join together to celebrate WHO’s achievements and to emphasise a selected aspect of health. As you are reading this issue of the journal, we will be approaching World Health Day for 2013 and this year, it will have the theme of “Hypertension” reflecting concerns about the increasing importance of chronic disease in public health. 2013 is the “Year of the Snake”, and as we know snakes can be silent killers, just like hypertension. Snakes and snake venom have a long history of use in traditional Chinese Medicine. The WHO emblem, which appears on the front cover of our journal, which dates back to the first World Health Assembly in 1948, includes a snake. The emblem consists of the United Nations symbol surmounted by a staff with a snake coiling round it. The staff with the snake has long been a symbol of medicine and the medical profession. It originates from the story of Aesculapius who was revered by the ancient Greeks as a god of healing and whose cult involved the use of snakes. (Aesculapius, incidentally, was so successful at saving lives that, the legend goes, Hades the god of the underworld complained about him to the supreme god Zeus who, fearing that the healer might make humans immortal, killed Aesculapius with a thunderbolt.)¹ In an editorial to mark the 25th anniversary of the journal, we noted that nine out of the top ten cited articles from the Journal related to chronic disease and two of these were on hypertension. Hypertension is a major and increasing public health problem in our region.

Hypertension is associated with anumber of serious health conditions including increased risk of stroke, coronary heart disease, chronic kidney disease and heart failure and ultimately mortality. There is no absolute cut-off value for hypertension and risk increases as blood pressure levels rise. Worldwide, high blood pressure has been found to be responsible for more deaths and disease than any other biomedical risk factor.² In this WHO sponsored study, they estimated the attributable deaths due to hypertension to be 7.5 million worldwide, with 1.8 million in the East Asia Pacific region and 1.2 million in South Asia.² In 2002, the Western Pacific region accounted for 39% of global deaths from stroke.

World Health Day 2013 will give out the message that hypertension is preventable and treatable. In some developed countries, prevention and treatment of hypertension, together with other cardiovascular risk factors, has brought about a major reduction in deaths from heart disease. The risk of developing hypertension can be reduced by: reducing salt intake, eating a balanced, traditional diet that avoids western fast foods, avoiding harmful use of alcohol, regular physical

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