

New UN Report: Millennium Development Goal 8.E

Essential medicines: the high price of health

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Halfway to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), essential medicines are more costly and less available than necessary, especially in developing countries. This new data on medicines access and pricing is contained in a report released by the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today in New York.

Delivering on the Global Partnership for Achieving the Millennium Development Goals was prepared by the Millennium Development Goals Gap Task Force on global partnerships, created by the UN Secretary-General to track international commitments on aid, trade, debt and to follow progress on access to essential medicines and technology. MDG Target 8.E is dedicated to achieving access to affordable essential medicines in developing countries.

The report found that in the public sector, generic medicines are only available in 34.9% of facilities, and on average cost 250% more than the international reference price. In the private sector, those same medicines are available in 63.2% of facilities, but cost on average about 650% more than the international reference price.

Prices are so high that people on a low wage have to work any number of days, or in some cases weeks, to buy treatments. For example, in Indonesia a low paid unskilled government worker has to work more than 4 days to buy just one salbutamol inhaler (an asthma medicine) in the private sector. This can lead to spiralling debt or they must go without treatment.

Ban Ki-moon describes the report as “a wake-up call”. “It is not enough to have effective, safe medicines if they are not affordable and available to those who needed them” said Margaret Ewen from Health Action International (HAI) “Governments must act to bring prices down and improve availability or else Target 8.E will be a UN failure.”

The report is based on surveys undertaken using a methodology developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and HAI. The MDG Gap Task Force report acknowledges the contribution that the medicine price and availability surveys have made, and cites policy recommendations based on the findings of over 50 surveys undertaken to date across the globe using the WHO/HAI survey tool.

Policy solutions such as passing on low government procurement prices to patients, eliminating taxes and duties on essential medicines, encouraging generic substitution and using low cost quality generics instead of expensive branded products will make all the difference to the poor.

The WHO/HAI survey methodology has provided a long-awaited means of setting targets and measuring progress towards Millennium Development Goal 8.E. It is now time for governments to act by developing, implementing and enforcing policies and programmes that ensure that all people, particularly the poor, have equitable access to affordable essential medicines.

For more information about the joint WHO/HAI Medicine Prices and Availability project, and for access to survey data and analysis, please go to <http://www.haiweb.org/medicineprices/>



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Overtoom 60/III
1054 HK Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Tel: +31 20 412 4523
Fax: +31 20 685 5002
Email: info@haiweb.org
www.haiweb.org