

Improving Heart Health in Europe

Sania Nishtar, MD, Janet Voûte, MA, and Danielle Grizeau-Clemens, MA, review the impact of a major World Heart Federation health promotion.

With the current focus on women's heart health by the American Heart Association's "Go Red for Women" campaign and Europe's "Women at Heart" initiative, it is appropriate to review another major programme that is designed to improve heart health in Europe and around the world. The World Heart Day programme was launched in September 2000 by the World Heart Federation (WHF), whose headquarters are in Geneva, Switzerland, to inform the public and policymakers about cardiovascular disease risk factors, healthy lifestyles, and the effectiveness of preventive measures.

World Heart Day is now celebrated towards the end of September every year and concentrates on a specific theme. The day has helped to build national capacity in member foundations and societies in low-income and middle-income countries year after year. The programme has served as a catalyst to the entire member network of the WHF, strengthening its sense of purpose and involvement in cardiovascular disease prevention.

In 2000, its first year, World Heart Day was celebrated in 70 countries, but only 6 of them were in Europe. In 2005, over 100 countries were actively involved, and 28 were from Europe. Last year, various European countries approached their activities in a number of ways.

In Italy, 17 information spots broadcast on the 7 national TV channels reached an audience of about 75.4 million people. Thirty-seven announcements were published free of charge in the print media just before the event. Major soccer matches were dedicated to World Heart Day, and at the local level, patient groups, health departments, and hospital clinics organised over 40 events, including "open hospitals," which offered cholesterol and blood pressure tests and measurement of waist circumference.

The Health and Heart Foundation of Bosnia and Herzegovina described its involvement as an excellent tool to influence the public and decision makers. The organisation has to deal with a population suffering from the aftermath of war and poor socioeconomic conditions. Nevertheless, it has encouraged the mass distribution of locally translated World Heart Day materials and the setting up of an insurance fund, training for primary healthcare workers, and a Healthy Heart Hotline.

Other European countries have also been taking part. In Norway, activities focused on promoting physical activity and a healthy lifestyle in children. A "Jump Rope for Heart" competition was launched, and new educational materials were distributed to teach children more about

physical activity, nutrition, and the dangers of smoking. In Iceland, the Heart Association held a risk stratification clinic complete with advice from cardiologists about risk factors, lifestyle, and nutrition. Blood pressure checks and free samples of fruit and vegetables were on hand. The health minister set a good example by taking the screening tests. In Estonia, many different events were held, including walking and jogging events for the public.

Some countries attract media attention by recruiting personalities to the effort: The Slovak Republic enlisted its first lady; Austria, its federal president; Bulgaria, a beauty queen; and Turkey, its athletes. Markos Kyprianou, the European commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection, joined the European Heart Network to release a statement on World Heart Day highlighting the urgent need for basic lifestyle changes among Europeans.



Free blood pressure checks were widely available on World Heart Day.

These examples show how the World Heart Day press and marketing materials and Web site have inspired creative individuals and organisations around the world. The programme has served as a platform for growth and development in many countries, thus helping to improve their skills in community public health interventions, health education, health promotion programmes, media management, and lobbying. The use of a single body of press material has shown that the cardiovascular network speaks with one voice worldwide. It has dramatically increased media coverage of cardiovascular disease prevention at all levels: regional, national, and international. The media coverage reached 133 million people in 2002 and over 437 million in 2005.

The World Heart Day programme is jointly sponsored by WHF and the World Health Organisation, which joined the WHF at a press conference about cardiovascular disease prevention in low-income and middle-income countries. Also, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation has distributed World Heart Day materials to its 170 offices around the globe.

World Heart Federation members Sania Nishtar, chair of the World Heart Day Committee and the Foundation Advisory Board; Janet Voûte, chief executive officer; and Danielle Grizeau-Clemens, science information officer, all contributed toward this article.