Deprivation affects more than half of the world's children

Susan Mayor *London*

More than half of the children in the world live in extreme deprivation due to poverty, war, and HIV/AIDS, warns a report published this week by the Unicef, which argues that these problems are impeding the development of the countries affected. The report also provides a complete almanac of up to date statistical data on children.

Children experience poverty differently from adults, and the standard measures of income or consumption fail to capture the impact of poverty on children, the report argues. To gain a clearer picture, the report's authors, from Unicef, the London School of Economics, and the University of Bristol, analysed access to seven services and goods they considered essential to children.

They found that an estimated 1 billion children from the total of 2.2 billion in the world were living in poverty. One in three (640 million) children did not have adequate shelter, 500 million had no access to sanitation, and 400 million did not have

access to safe water. Furthermore, 90 million children were severely deprived of food and 270 million had no access to healthcare services.

Statistics showed that poverty was not exclusive to developing countries. The proportion of children living in low income households had increased over the past decade in 11 of the 15 developed countries for which comparable data were available.

Extreme poverty was considered one of the central causes of conflict, along with poor governance. The report found that 55 of 59 armed conflicts that took place between 1990 and 2003 occurred within, rather than between, countries. Children accounted for nearly half of the 3.6 million people killed in these conflicts. Conflict also had a catastrophic impact on overall health. In a typical five year war, the mortality of children under the age of 5 years increased by 13%.

The impact of HIV/AIDS on children was seen most dramatically in the number of orphans

to AIDS—now totalling 15 million worldwide. In addition, the report found that AIDS was now the single largest killer of people aged 15-49 in the developing world.

Carol Bellamy, executive director of Unicef, warned that

failure by governments to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child caused permanent damage to children. □

The State of the World's Children 2005: Childhood Under Threat is available at www.unicef.org

Government tells hospitals to tighten up cleaning contracts

Ann McGauran *London*

The UK government has launched new guidance to help ensure that hospitals in England have clear and binding contracts to deliver high standards of cleaning. It has taken this step to ensure that the incidence of methicillin resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) and other infections is reduced.

Health minister Lord Warner announced that the new guidance gives "best practice" advice on evaluating and awarding contracts so that quality as well as

price is considered. It also includes revised national specifications for cleanliness, setting out minimum standards.

Lord Warner said that specifying how many times different areas of the hospital should be cleaned and what level of cleanliness is required meant that both hospitals and cleaning firms would know what was expected.

He said it was the latest step in the drive to improve cleanliness and lower rates of infection.

The National Audit Office estimated in 2002 that MRSA cost the NHS £1bn (\$1.9bn; €1.4bn) a year and could be killing around 5000 patients a year.

The guidance suggests that areas of the hospital be allocated to four risk categories, ranging from low to very high risk and that cleaning be divided into 49 elements including medical equipment, floors, ceilings, and beds. Each element is given a cleaning frequency.

The guidance was announced on the same day as the second round of scores from the Patient Environment Action Teams (PEATs) for English hospitals was published. These teams provide a local snapshot of cleanliness and food standards on the day of

inspection and place hospitals in five categories, ranging from excellent to poor.

After the first round of visits by these teams in 2004, 90 out of 1184 hospitals were rated "poor" or "unacceptable" for cleanliness, whereas after the most recent visit only 24 were classified as "poor" and three as "unacceptable." According to Lord Warner, "the real low flyers"—the three hospitals whose cleaning was rated as unacceptable—had already contracted out their cleaning to private providers. □

The national PEAT scores and the new guidance on contracting cleaning can be found at www.cleanhospitals.com