1. BACKGROUND

In 1970, there were about 307 million people over 60 years of age in the world. By 2000, this figure is likely to be close to 580 million. This rate of increase is somewhat higher than the overall increase in world population.

In developed countries, the aging of the population has already caused a notable shift in population structure. The developed world, however, is currently undergoing the first large step of that shift. Recent changes in life expectancy and fertility patterns have caused an increase in the numbers and proportions of elderly people and the population, and changes in the relationship of these people to society and its services.

2. ISSUES

Aging is a natural process, a part of the continuation of the human life span. What must be addressed is that adequate and reasonable care should be taken of this section of the spectrum as its volume and proportion increase and that the community structure and philosophy should be altered accordingly.

There is a considerable amount of data on this subject but obviously not all aspects of the issue are addressed. As each society, from national level to community and family level, develops, so will the need for data and the very nature of that data change.
There are two extremes in the approach to dealing with care of the elderly – one, that it is a problem, the elderly being a group apart, and the other that they are simply part of the active adult population. Neither approach addresses the key issue, that aging is part of the spectrum of life but that, like any other section of the spectrum, it has its own problems, priorities and potentials.

The Western Pacific Region is one of great variety in terms of size, degree of development, social structure and demographic structure of Member States. One of the things held in common by all its Members is the issue of the aging of the population. Action to address the issue on a regional and global basis has already begun. The issue must now be further addressed on a national and community level.

3. ACTION TO DATE

In 1982, the World Assembly on Aging recommended to the United Nations General Assembly the Vienna International Plan of Action on Aging. Key objectives of the plan included the need for basic research and for programmes of cooperation and exchange of skills and knowledge at a regional level.

A working group on health care of the elderly met in Manila in 1981. This was followed by a regional four-country study of the health and social aspects of aging, sponsored by the WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific, and an intercountry workshop on health of the elderly in Fukuoka, Japan, in October 1984.

The report of the workshop was distributed to Member States in January 1985.

Some of its major conclusions were aimed at a process of collaboration between WHO and Member States and between Member States themselves in order to develop policy guidelines on aging, stressing the need for such guidelines to be consistent with the principles of primary health care.

The four-country study, the results of which are due for publication late in 1985, has done much to delineate on a regional basis the issues, the problems and the expectations of the elderly. A general review of the study indicates, in the countries concerned, a reasonable level of physical and mental health in their elderly populations. It indicates a series of common health problems, many of which need to be overcome in order to re-establish the individual as an active and independent member of the community.

The meeting in Fukuoka has delineated the following issues:

- That demographic changes and trends in both developed and developing countries are producing an increasing proportion and number of elderly persons.

- That the aged utilize as do the very young a disproportionate segment of the health budget.

- That prevention, promotion and self-sufficiency measures are as important in care of the elderly as they are in maternal and child care to ensure a better utilization of resources.
4. ACTION REQUIRED

Two issues must be addressed as a matter of urgency:

(1) That opportunities exist in the Western Pacific Region for cooperation between countries and for building on studies such as the four-country study on aging in Asia and Oceania in order to develop an information base.

(2) That the opportunity must be taken now to use such information and to share experience to plan and develop policies and strategies for care of the aged in order that this increasing section of the communities of the Region may take part in the goal of health for all by the year 2000.

A draft resolution for consideration by Member States will be circulated at the forthcoming session of the Regional Committee.