

File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1991-0014a

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Address by Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
at the
World Congress on Healthcare

New York
23 May 1991



UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label



tem # **CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/2002-01039**

ExR/Code: **CF/EXD/SP/1991-0014a**

World Congress on Healthcare. FIRST DRAFT ONLY. Statement
Date Label Printed 20-Aug-2002

cover + 4pp + 8b

Cohen/14 May

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It is a great thing, this cutting-edge communications technology that defies geography and frontiers and enables healthcare professionals in far-flung places to join in this important World Congress on Healthcare. I would like to thank the organizers for the opportunity to share UNICEF's urgent message with such a distinguished global audience.

Our message is an urgent one essentially because -- as health workers understand full well -- children cannot wait. Their minds and bodies get only one chance to grow and develop. Today and every day, some 40,000 children will lose that chance, dying from ordinary malnutrition and disease. 150 million others will survive this day, but with their chances severely compromised by ill-health and poor growth. And today will be another day of wasted potential and stunted intellectual development for the 100 million 6 to 11-year-olds who cannot attend school. At UNICEF, we call this the "quiet emergency".

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No-one knows better than you do that the means of ending this catastrophe are now both available and affordable. The vast majority of the 14 million children under five who die yearly in the developing countries could be saved by giving their families and communities access to simple, low-cost interventions -- empowering them with tools and know-how such as immunization against vaccine-preventable diseases; oral rehydration therapy against life-draining diarrhoea; prenatal care for mothers and exclusive breastfeeding of infants during their first 4-6 months; vitamin A against blindness and impaired growth; clean water and adequate sanitation, among others. And the children of the poor in the industrialized world, whose vital statistics begin to look more and more like those of their brothers and sisters in the developing countries, can also, in their millions, be given that one chance at healthy growth -- again, through affordable interventions and the adoption of healthier lifestyles by their families.

Last September 30, at the World Summit for Children, 71 heads of state or government -- plus senior representatives of 88 other countries -- pledged to work for a better future for all children, discarding as unacceptable and unconscionable, those traditional excuses -- hard times, wars, emergencies -- societies use to explain away the neglect and abuse of the young.

It was the first near-global summit in history but, strangely enough, these leaders from North and South, East and West did not simply find a lowest common denominator to agree upon or an abstract, high-sounding principle to

endorse. They put their signatures to a Plan of Action, a detailed strategy with measurable goals, timeframes for implementation and mechanisms for monitoring progress. They essentially asked the world to hold them and their governments accountable for what they do or do not do for children. And they promised to come up with the resources to pay for it all.

By the year 2000, if we are successful, some 50 million child lives will be saved against current trends and many millions more will get the chance to realize their potential. Economic development will get an important boost from the investment made in children's well-being and population growth will be significantly slowed. The dramatic success of universal child immunization -- over 80 per cent of the world's under one-year-olds vaccinated against the six major child-killers by the end of last year -- showed that all of this, and much more, is "do-able".

1991 is the start-up year for the plans and budgetary allocations, the restructuring of priorities and taking of actions for children contemplated in the World Summit programme. That is also where the urgency comes in. Healthcare professionals -- in the public and private sectors, in direct service and product development, in management and the media -- are, obviously, in an excellent position to see to it that the political momentum demonstrated at the World Summit is not lost and that it gets translated into action. You are not only on the front line of service to people in need but can serve as authoritative advocates over the decade that lies ahead for keeping the World Summit promise to children.

Can we work together to meet this moral and practical challenge, all of us, sorting out the complex problems of economics and demographics, of vested interests and divergent points of view, of public versus private healthcare, of ethics and common sense, of reaching the poorest and narrowing disparities? I am convinced we can, knowing that a great prize awaits society and the world as a whole, if we succeed.

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