Netherlands Red Cross innovation program for heat waves

Due to climate change the KNMI expects an increased chance of extreme weather conditions in the Netherlands. Over the past few years several weather records have been broken. These range from extremely wet and dry months and extreme day and night temperatures to heavy rain fall and snow blizzards.

One of the risks is the increased number and duration of heat waves. Those who suffer most from tropical temperatures are the sick and the elderly (65+), particularly if they live alone. This isolated group is an important target group of the Netherlands Red Cross. The burden caused by heat waves can lead to premature death. During the heat wave of 2003, for example, death rate in the Netherlands alone rose by 1000 – 1500. In Western Europe, between 22,000 and 35,000 more people died in the 2003 heat wave. Heat waves are particularly hazardous in urban areas because the heat has less chance to escape.

It is expected that extreme heat such as the one in 2003 will occur more frequently in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, despite the number of victims in 2003, the public health care system has hardly undertaken special activities.

Simple measures can be taken that will make people less vulnerable to the hazards of a heat wave. People can be encouraged to drink more water, exert less effort in the afternoon, rest in cooler and shady places, use wet towels, lower the blinds, and wear a hat. Although anyone can suffer from a heat wave, it is important to pay extra attention to more vulnerable population groups.

The Netherlands Red Cross is in a unique position to initiate both an internal and external course of action to address the risks of heat waves. In the next two years, the Netherlands Red Cross will better prepare itself and local Red Cross branches against the risks of heat waves. Furthermore, it will urge other organizations (such as local governments and the Ministry of Health) to undertake a more pro-active role in disaster preparedness.

A Dutch volunteer helps an old lady who is suffering from the heat.

The internal course of action focuses on the organization itself, and on those demanding assistance. The goal is to better prepare the Netherlands Red Cross to provide adequate assistance before and during a heat wave to reduce the number of victims. Important aspects include the training of volunteers, organizing assistance at a regional level (many local branches are less active in the summertime, precisely when the risk of heat waves is highest), and meeting with
those who will be in need of assistance. Local branches will be stimulated to cooperate with other agencies in the area, such as the health departments of local governments and home care agencies. In 2006 an experimental project will be launched with several large branches. The aim is that by 2007 more branches will be better equipped to deal with the risks of heat waves.

The external course of action focuses on other organizations that are involved and/or responsible for public health. The goal is to improve cooperation so that an umbrella of support can be created. The first step is to bring all parties together and to make a concerted effort to recognize the risks of heat waves. Launched in the spring of 2006, this initiative will be taken together with the Ministry of Health.

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