

Pekka Puska  
President, World Heart Federation (WHF)  
Geneva, Switzerland  
Director General  
National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL)  
Helsinki, Finland

*International Expert Meeting 'Health Significance of fat quality of the diet', Barcelona, 2 Febr. 2009*

## **FAT AND HEART DISEASE**

- Yes we can make a change,  
the case of North Karelia /Finland

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the main cause of mortality in the world, responsible for every third death. CVD is the leading cause of mortality in a majority of countries of the world. The problem is rapidly growing in the low and middle income countries. The main causal risk factors for atherosclerotic CVD have been convincingly revealed decades ago. They relate closely to some lifestyles. The role of diet, particularly that of quality of fat and of salt, especially through blood LDL cholesterol and blood pressure have become more and more obvious.

Although changing diet and other risk related lifestyles among high risk persons can bring great benefit to those individuals, population based prevention through influencing population diets and other lifestyles is by far the most cost effective and sustainable way for reduction of CVD rates and promotion of heart health in the population.

Finland was faced in the 1970's with an exceptionally high mortality of CVD in the population and had to start preventive work. The action that was first started in the Province of North Karelia and later in all Finland, concentrated heavily on changing population diets, esp. quality of fat and vegetable use, to reduce the high blood cholesterol levels of the population. The action in Finland has been a comprehensive one involving health education, preventive work in health services, work at schools, broad collaboration with NGOs and the private sector, government policies, population based monitoring and evaluation, and international collaboration.

The work has been associated with remarkable changes in diets and reduction in blood cholesterol levels. It has led to a 80% reduction in annual CVD mortality rates among working aged population, to major increase in life expectancy and to major improvement in functional capacity and health. Studies have shown that the reduction in blood cholesterol levels, explained by the target dietary changes, have had the greatest impact on these very favourable health changes. Thus the Finnish experience shows both the feasibility and great potential of CVD prevention and heart health promotion through general dietary changes in the population.