

Ministerial panel discussion calls for addressing unopposed marketing of unhealthy products to prevent noncommunicable diseases



In the context of the activities held during the Regional Committee, a panel discussion was held focusing on the prevention of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). The panel was moderated by renowned TV anchorwoman Mrs. Laila Al-Shaikhali. Panelists included the Minister of Health of Oman Dr Ahmad Al-Saidi; Minister of Health of Tunisia Dr. Mohammed Saleh Bin Ammar; WHO Regional Director Dr. Ala Alwan; Professor Philip James, immediate Past President of the World Obesity Federation; Professor Majid Ezzati from the School of Public Health at Imperial College, London; and Dr Ties Boerma, Director of Health Statistics and Informatics at WHO Headquarters in Geneva.

Following a lively and engaged discussion, interventions from the floor also contributed to further enriching the dialogue. The panel discussion highlighted a range of issues, beginning with identifying the problem of the rising burden of NCDs, and specifically deaths due to NCDs, to the trends of increasing prevalence of the main shared risk factors for NCDs, which create further challenges for the future. Panelists and the audience agreed that the WHO strategy for addressing NCDs which focuses on the three pillars of prevention, surveillance and health care, continues to be relevant and constitutes the main agenda for addressing NCDs. WHO also has the roadmap and tools for implementation. The key issue is the inadequate implementation of proven measures for NCD prevention, particularly interventions which are cost-effective, affordable, and feasible to implement in all health systems. In some countries, there have been reversals of prior gains in the prevention and control of NCDs. Several factors explain this situation. These include, among others, inadequate platforms for multisectoral action on NCDs, as much of NCD prevention requires interventions by sectors other than health, limited capacities within ministries of health, and the influence of vested interests including those linked to the tobacco industry and the unhealthy food industry.

Nassir Shamma: Composer and health advocate

Panelists agreed on the need to raise the priority given to NCD prevention through innovative approaches that need to engage a wide range of actors and partners. An example was given from the floor by the famous composer and master oud player, Mr Nassir Shamma, who saw the opportunity to engage his colleagues in drama to promote healthy lifestyles and prevent NCDs through their work. Dr. Alwan announced a new WHO initiative to address unopposed marketing of tobacco and unhealthy products to the public working in close coordination with ministers of health and a range of partners.



RD's award to Laila Shaikhali

At the end of the panel discussion on NCDs prevention and control, Regional Director Dr. Alwan presented Mrs. Al-Shaikhali with an engraved plate in appreciation of her dedication and contributions



Election of RC officers



In its first working session held yesterday morning, the Regional Committee elected H.E. Professor Mohamed Saleh bin Ammar (Tunisia) as the Chairperson. Both H.E. Dr Adeela Hammoud (Iraq) and H.E. Mrs Saira Afzal Tarar (Pakistan) were elected as first Vice-Chairperson and second Vice-Chairperson respectively.

H.E. Dr Ali bin Talib Al-Hinai (Oman) was elected Chairperson of the Technical Discussions.

Members of RC united for health



Participants of the 61st session of the Regional Committee meeting in Tunisia at the start of the 3-days event.

98 delegates, 48 international, regional and national organizations and 3 special guests are participating in this year's RC meeting.

Full compliance with International Health Regulations provides health security

With the increased spread of diseases around the world, participants discussed the challenges and opportunities of Global Health Security with special emphasis on International Health Regulations (2005). Since 2000, several outbreaks of emerging infectious diseases have occurred across the globe and resulted in significant harm to health, economies and social well-being. Most recently, these include Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS-CoV) and Ebola virus disease. The lessons to date were that any region, including EMRO, could be affected, and no country could afford to ignore threats to global health security. Consequently, EMRO urged Member States to address longstanding health system gaps on an urgent basis as a safeguard to the emergence of diseases and other health threats.

Progress review of the Regional priority areas of work

Currently in the middle of his term of office, Regional Director Dr. Ala Alwan reviewed the key developments and progress of the five strategic priorities identified in his annual report. Dr. Alwan highlighted the significant strategic developments in each priority area and noted the key challenges. In the area of health systems, EMRO will review the outcome of assessments on the strengths and challenges of the health system in each country, and Dr Alwan will agree on the areas where WHO support is most needed.

The picture with regards to communicable diseases in the Region is more challenging now than has been the case in many years. This has resulted in serious difficulties and set-backs, particularly in polio eradication and measles elimination. Support included reviews of immunization programmes, strengthening disease surveillance networks and vaccine management. Dr Alwan appealed to countries to re-double their efforts and find appropriate ways and mechanisms to overcome accessibility problems.

In the area of emergencies, Dr Alwan stressed the need to strengthen WHO's response in the area of humanitarian health relief, but also noted that strategically what is equally crucial is for countries to adopt a comprehensive national emergency management strategy which addresses all hazards and covers all sectors.

The joint programme of work of WHO and Member States in the area of noncommunicable diseases focuses on operationalising the Regional Framework for Action and scaling up the implementation of the United Nations Political Declaration on the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases.

Maternal and child health has been addressed by launching the regional initiative on Saving the Lives of Mothers and Children and together with Member States, as UNICEF and UNFPA. Maternal and child health acceleration plans have been developed for the nine high-burden countries. By January 2014, all nine countries were implementing priority activities in their plans using start-up funds allocated by WHO.

Dr Alwan concluded by asking Member States to show their commitment by implementing the strategies and converting them into action.

Awards ceremony honours health experts

In a ceremony held last night, Professor Abba Mehio Sibai (Lebanon) was awarded the Dr A.T. Shousha Foundation Prize for 2014. The State of Kuwait Prize for the Control of Cancer, Cardiovascular Diseases and Diabetes in the Eastern Mediterranean Region was awarded, in the field of oncology, to Dr Khaled Al Saleh (Kuwait). Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean presents the prizes to the awardees.



Pakistan vows full commitment to eradicating polio

In a special session on polio held on the sidelines of the Regional Committee's meetings, Pakistan gave a detailed presentation on the current situation of the disease's transmission and highlighted priority actions and procedures to accelerate and intensify polio eradication in the country.

H.E. the Minister of State, Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination of Pakistan reiterated the full commitment of her country to the cause of polio eradication. She noted that Pakistan suffered from a unique situation with strong resistance against polio campaigns and more than 60 health-related workers killed during these polio campaigns.

A military operation launched recently in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where 80% of cases had been reported this year, had enabled immunization campaigns for children in those areas who were not previously accessible. She said that Pakistan had initiated various steps to ensure preparedness for dealing with the Ebola virus and would carry out all necessary precautions in this area. The Prime Minister had recently approved a national health insurance scheme to cover the poor and vulnerable which would cover a population of about 100 million. She also emphasized that the key to improving health status lay in strengthening health systems.



RC 61 addresses WHO reform

WHO reform and programme and budget matters were addressed during the RC meeting. The reform was initiated by the Executive Board in May 2011 as a consultative process driven by Member States to address the nature and role of the Organization in the rapidly changing field of health. The three main areas of reform were programmes and priority-setting, governance, and management. It was clearly important that Member States from the Region be fully engaged in the debate on WHO reform as it would substantially impact WHO's work at all levels, especially country level.