

Eastern Mediterranean region to gear up for imminent health risks



Participants of the 62nd regional committee meeting continued their discussions on pertinent health issues for the second day, focusing on the imminent threat posed by viruses such as the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome – Corona Virus (MERS CoV), Avian Influenza A (H5N1) and Ebola.

Other issues on their agenda included public health functions, progress made in implementing the United Nations General Assembly political declaration on non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and their risk factors. Special attention was given to tobacco consumption which increase the risk of NCDs.

The discussions highlighted two main points yesterday; the need to ensure the political will to guarantee a comprehensive governmental approach and the vital importance of applying a multi-sectoral approach that involves non-health sectors, private sector, non-governmental organizations, patients and their families in activities pertaining to NCDs. While touching on global health security issue with a focus on MERS-CoV and Avian Flu (H5N1), it became apparent how ill-prepared the world



is to handle these risks, especially as the countries affected by outbreaks of these diseases, suffer severely from disrupted health systems. The focus of the discussion on international health regulations (IHR) was the importance of conducting more objective assessments of country preparedness to meet IHR requirements as WHO representatives expressed their concerns about the discrepancies between the results of the Ebola assessment missions and those of the IHR assessment.

In response, member states called for the establishment of an external joint assessment body to follow up on the implementation of IHR requirements and to support governments in completing the task. This came in light of a point raised that without organizational regulations; an



enabling environment; and technical and financial support it will remain difficult for low income countries to meet IHR requirements.

Participants discussed how to be better prepared for emergencies while commending the EMRO's innovative approaches in dealing with various challenges. Most recently, the EMRO had established a logistical hub in Dubai, UAE where medical supplies and medications would be ready to be deployed to any country in the region; built an emergency response surge team ready for deployment as soon as an emergency happens; and implemented a new emergency structure to overcome the organizational challenges that might have slowed the response in the past.

Delivering health services in emergencies



Half the countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region are currently in emergency, most often from conflict. A high-level panel, moderated by WHO Director of Communication Christy Feig, brought voices from the frontlines of major emergencies to explore the challenges they face in emergency response and discuss innovative ways of working around them. The Minister of Health from Somalia Dr Hawa Hassan Mohamad spoke about the challenges of protracted emergencies, Jordan's Director of Primary Healthcare Dr Basheer Al-Qaseer elaborated on the impact of more than one million refugees on the national health system, WHO representatives from Iraq, Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen all echoed similar difficulties including lack of access to hard-to-reach areas, shortages of medicines, health workers, fuel, water and financial resources. Dr Keiji Fukuda, Assistant Director-General of health security explained why steps to prevent disease outbreaks must be included in humanitarian responses since an uncontrolled outbreak can devastate a health system the same as a disaster.

Finally Assistant Undersecretary for Public Health Affairs at the Ministry of Health in Kuwait, Dr Majida Al-Kahtan expressed concern about the need to ensure organizations and Member States who pledge support follow it through with contributions.

Discussion expanded to additional challenges especially managing psychological and mental health issues which proved to be difficult everywhere for both capacity and stigma. There was also clear consensus that the best way to reach hard to access areas was working with people in the local communities, NGOs or local health workers.

Because there are so many emergencies in this Region, WHO is already implementing initiatives that are proven to help the Organization respond faster and more efficiently according to EMRO's Director of Program Management, Dr Jaoud Mahjour including positioning people and supplies closer to the needs and working with partners, especially local partners who know the local language, culture and community.

RC Agenda: Challenges facing medical education in the region



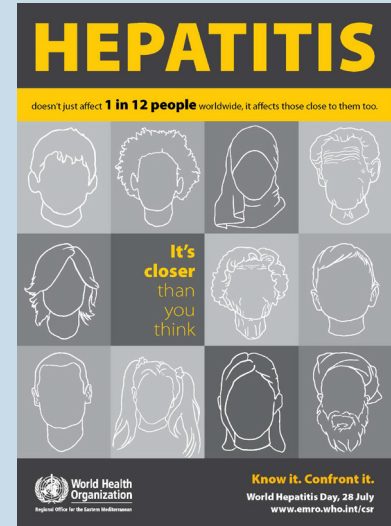
Today the regional committee will address the challenges facing medical education in the region, based on a comprehensive review of the situation undertaken by the World Health Organization.

The review addressed undergraduate medical education to identify the challenges facing medical education in the region. A total of 157 of the 297 medical schools invited (53%) responded to a survey, including at least 20% of the medical schools in each country.

The results showed that medical schools in most countries are inadequately equipped to provide an enabling environment and learning resources, with particular challenges in the availability of educational resources to support student-centered education and clinical skills training.

Key governance challenges were identified in the areas of regulation, needs assessment, accreditation, social accountability, distribution of medical schools and migration of graduates. Other major challenges pertained to teaching methodologies, curriculum design and relevance when it comes to methods, training and quality. The principal criteria for faculty promotion are years of work experience, research and publications, however, more than 65% of medical schools reported having a weak or non-existent development programme for teaching faculty.

Hepatitis: A major threat to the health of the region



The Eastern Mediterranean is among the regions most affected by viral hepatitis in the world. Every year, around 4.3 million people are infected with hepatitis B and 800,000 people with hepatitis C—17 million people currently suffer from chronic hepatitis C. World Hepatitis Day shed light on viral hepatitis as a serious public health threat. A report submitted to the regional committee this year outlines the initiatives announced to control Hepatitis in those countries most affected by the virus.

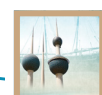
Tobacco control and economic myths

In her presentation on tobacco, a risk factor that increases the prevalence of NCDs, Professor Judith Macay, Senior Advisor at the World Lung Foundation, pointed out that the Eastern Mediterranean region has the lowest taxes on tobacco products worldwide and the highest rate of consumption of tobacco products among the young generation. The tobacco industry has endlessly exerted every effort to block any tax increases on their products by creating a number of economic myths including that the tobacco industry creates jobs, generates sources of income for outlets and banning tobacco ads has cut into

revenues for the media industry. Another popular myth is that taxing tobacco products will increase the trade of illicit tobacco products.

As the world's population increases, the number of smokers is expected to increase as well as the number of those killed by tobacco-related diseases; and the Eastern Mediterranean region will have the highest increase in tobacco prevalence in the world.

Professor Judith Macay reiterated the necessity to increase the taxes on tobacco products, including shisha, in order to reduce tobacco consumption.



Alwan expresses appreciation to H.E. Dr Ali Al-Obaidi for hosting the RC 62 session



In appreciation for hosting the 62nd session of the Regional Committee, Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean presented H.E. Dr Ali Al-Obaidi, Minister of Health of Kuwait a trophy in a dinner held yesterday. Expressing his thanks, Dr Al Obaidi reiterated that hosting the meetings in Kuwait reflects the strong relationship between the ministry of health and WHO- a relationship he vowed to continue supporting for the betterment of health in the region

Dr. A.T. Shousha Foundation Prize for 2015 awarded to Dr. Yagoub Al Mazrou, KSA



The Dr. A.T. Shousha Foundation Prize for 2015 was awarded today to Dr. Yagoub Yousef Al Mazrou (Saudi Arabia) for his significant contribution to public health in the geographical area in which Dr. Shousha served WHO.

Dr. Yagoub Yousef Al Mazrou served with the Ministry of Health and was instrumental in developing primary health care in his country, overseeing a major expansion in the network of health centres and improvements in child immunization coverage as well as in the health security of pilgrims. Throughout his career, Dr. Al Mazrou has made major contributions to the epidemiology of infectious diseases and continues to be active in health care development. In his acceptance speech, Dr. Yagoub Al Mazrou expressed his gratitude for being chosen for the award saying "Giving is one of the greatest human values. Working in health is one of the few fields where one can contribute to the positive changes while serving the community. I have been honored to work in the health field for 32 years as a member of the Saudi, Gulf, Arab and international teams."

Health agenda After 2015 moves from MDGs to Sustainable Development Goals

Member States in the Eastern Mediterranean Region have made substantial progress towards achievement of the health related Millennium Development Goals 1, 4, 5 and 6, although the progress is variable both across and within countries.

There is agreement among the global health community and governments to continue improving health and reducing disparities in the post-2015 era.

The United Nations General Assembly will convene a summit to adopt the post-2015 development agenda. 17 Sustainable Development Goals have been proposed. Goal 3 aims to "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages", while health also cuts across the majority of the other SDGs.



It has nine targets that address the unfinished agenda of the MDGs, the rising burden of noncommunicable diseases and including universal health coverage.

In working to meet the targets of the SDGs, WHO will continue to support Member States of the Region in addressing the priority health areas identified, in line with existing WHO strategies and initiatives.