

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
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ORGANISATION MONDIALE DE LA SANTE
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**Progress report on
Cancer prevention and control**

Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	Progress in cancer control	1
2.1	National commitment to cancer control	1
2.2	Capacity-building	1
2.3	Partnership and resources mobilization	3
3.	Challenges and future directions	3

1. Introduction

The rising burden of cancer is one of the fastest growing health concerns globally, including in countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The rapid rise in the burden of cancer is attributed to drastic changes in lifestyle including unhealthy diet, smoking, lack of sufficient physical activity, exposure to environmental hazards and other lifestyle-associated risk factors.

In October 2009, the Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean endorsed a regional strategy for cancer control (EM/RC56/R/4) developed by the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean in collaboration with Member States. The strategy development process identified a number of critical gaps in cancer prevention and control in the Region, namely weak political commitment, lack of capacity and limited financial and human resources. This report provides a summary of the progress made in addressing those gaps since the adoption of the regional cancer control strategy.

2. Progress in cancer control

2.1 National commitment to cancer control

A key element for cancer control identified by the strategy is the establishment of a high level national committee to promote cancer prevention and strengthen cancer surveillance. Over the past two years, WHO has assisted countries in advocating for the development of national cancer control committees in order to foster an intersectoral approach and mobilize resources for cancer prevention and control.

The Regional Office provided technical support for the development of national plans guided by the regional cancer control strategy and reflecting national priority and resources in Iraq, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Morocco, Qatar, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen. Technical assistance was provided to review and update national plans and screening and management guidelines in Bahrain, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kuwait, Oman and Saudi Arabia (Table 1).

In collaboration with headquarters and other stakeholders (International Agency for Research on Cancer, International Atomic Energy Agency), the Regional Office developed a capacity assessment tool for cancer prevention and control. During 2010, Bahrain, Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman and Yemen used the tool to map resources and gaps.

2.2 Capacity-building

WHO and partners are working to build the capacity of countries for early detection and management of cancer, with special emphasis on priority areas of cancer prevention and control.

Cancer registry

Establishment of efficient and accurate cancer registration systems is the foremost priority for regional action. The Regional Office is giving special attention to strengthening national cancer registries. Collaborative efforts have included training workshops, country visits and exchange of information (Egypt, Jordan, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Oman, Sudan and Yemen). The Regional Office is also promoting a regional network of population-based cancer registries as an approach to improve the quality of cancer data.

Table 1. Progress of cancer control planning

	National plan developed	National committee	Guidelines for screening of most common cancer	National breast cancer screening plan
Afghanistan	NA	x	x	x
Bahrain	✓	NA	NA	NA
Egypt	In progress	✓	Insufficient	Insufficient
Islamic Republic of Iran	✓	✓	✓	✓
Iraq	In progress	✓	In progress	✓
Jordan	✓	✓	✓	✓
Kuwait	✓	✓	x	✓
Lebanon	✓	✓	Insufficient	✓
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	In progress	✓	x	x
Morocco	✓	✓	In progress	✓
Oman	✓	✓	✓	In progress
Pakistan	Insufficient	Insufficient	Insufficient	Insufficient
Palestine	Insufficient	Insufficient	Insufficient	Insufficient
Qatar	✓	✓	x	In progress
Saudi Arabia	✓	✓	✓	In progress
Somalia	NA	x	x	x
Sudan	✓	✓	In progress	In progress
Syrian Arab Republic	✓	✓	In progress	x
Tunisia	✓	✓	In progress	In progress
United Arab Emirates	Insufficient	Insufficient	Insufficient	✓
Yemen	In progress	Insufficient	Insufficient	x

NA information not available

Palliative care

In recognition of the major gap in palliative care in the Region, and the high percentage of cancer patients in advanced stage of the disease, the Regional Office has conducted series of training sessions for physicians and medical staff connected with palliative care. Training focused on the use of WHO protocol for integration of palliative care in primary health care to expand the services and empower primary health care staff based on preliminary assessment of country needs and resources, a special training programme was also organized with regional WHO collaborating centres in Jordan and Saudi Arabia to develop and sustain training for home-based palliative care programmes.

The Regional Office is also working to raise awareness on the limited access to painkillers (opioids) for cancer patients in all countries of the Region. Collaborative efforts in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libyan Jamahiriya, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia are focusing on review of legislation to improve the availability of painkillers for cancer patients.

Breast cancer

With breast cancer the most common cancer among females in the Region, countries have demonstrated a strong commitment for breast cancer screening and early detection. The Regional Office is working closely with Member States and international partners to build national capacities for early detection and management of breast cancer. In Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman and Saudi Arabia, training and orientation sessions have been held for self-examination and education material developed for awareness-raising. Training on a new protocol for breast cancer detection was held in Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Qatar, Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia.

2.3 Partnership and resources mobilization

Member States, the Regional Office and other partners are working jointly to highlight the importance of training and capacity building in all areas of cancer control, especially breast cancer screening, palliative care and cancer registry. The main collaborators to date are the Regional Alliance against Cancer, Gulf Federation for Cancer Control, European Arab School of Oncology and Susan G. Komen for the Cure.

Regional collaborating centres

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, the Regional Office provided technical support to WHO collaborating centres for building national and regional capacity for cancer treatment and research. Agreements were made between WHO and the centres to support five training programmes in countries of the Region.

3. Challenges and future directions

Further progress in cancer prevention and control is impeded by weak political commitment, resource constraints, lack of national capacity in most areas of cancer prevention and control, lack of valid and reliable data, limited public awareness on cancer risk factors and symptoms, and insufficiently developed palliative care services with inadequate legislation for pain relief.

To address these challenges, countries in collaboration with WHO should undertake the following approaches.

- Sensitizing policy-makers and decision-makers to promote investment and secure the resources required for cancer prevention, early detection, treatment and palliative care.
- Building national capacities for cancer control including training of human resources and development of regional guidelines for cancer registry and palliative care.
- Supporting the integration of cancer prevention and screening programmes in primary health care through institutional capacity-building in low-income and middle-income countries.
- Developing cancer registries and information systems in countries with limited or no cancer registry programme.
- Promoting healthy lifestyles and tobacco control to combat the primary causes of cancer.
- Strengthening palliative care services, including revision of legislation for painkillers and expanding home-based palliative care programmes.
- Supporting the establishment of national and regional networks among programmes and cancer professionals.