



Message from
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World AIDS Day
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Dignity
above all



World AIDS Day this year comes in the light of the global commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Target 3.3 of the SDGs represents a commitment for ending AIDS as a public health epidemic by 2030. Despite commendable work by Member States towards this goal, we are still encountering many obstacles and challenges against access to lifesaving health care services. Until the end of 2015, less than 20% of people living with HIV (PLHIV) in the region knew their HIV status and only 14% of them were receiving treatment. Regrettably, HIV-related stigma and discrimination in health care settings is one of the main barriers to receiving HIV diagnosis, care and treatment services.

It is unacceptable that, over 35 years into the epidemic, stigma and discrimination against PLHIV is still widespread among health care workers of all disciplines. Stigma and discrimination in health care settings seriously constrain our ability to end the HIV epidemic. Additionally and, contrary to medical ethics PLHIV often endure rejection and denial of health care for general conditions that are related or unrelated to their HIV infection. Such negative experiences deter those in need from seeking care and eventually their health deteriorates.

Stigma and discrimination in health care settings prevail for a number of reasons. Misconceptions about modes of transmission of HIV still persist among health care workers. At the same time, there is limited effort and lack of clear strategies to address the protection of health workers with respect to occupational exposure to HIV.

Judgmental attitudes towards PLHIV get in the way of simply providing the needed care and support due to the lack of clear policies and regulations that protect the rights of PLHIV to health care and provide guidance and best practices for health care facilities.

Facing this situation, I announced last year the launch of the HIV basic knowledge and stigma reduction in health care settings. In follow-up this year, I have called upon our Member States to take active steps to stop HIV stigma and discrimination in health care settings. Together and in a participatory approach involving governments, health care workers, PLHIV and nongovernmental organizations we developed policies which the ministers of health are announcing in 14 countries of the region on the occasion of World AIDS Day on 1 December 2016.

Health is a right for all. And rights are only respected by respecting dignity. It is not an option, it is a collective obligation for governments, community organizations, health care workers and everyone delivering and receiving health care services. The time has come that we all stand up together and say in one voice "Dignity above all".