



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Address by

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WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

**SIDE-EVENT ON THE INITIATIVE TO END THE HIV TREATMENT CRISIS
IN THE WHO**

**EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND UNAIDS MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH
AFRICA REGIONS**

Muscat, Oman, 28 October 2013

Your Excellencies,

I thank you all for joining us here today.

Current challenges in the response to the HIV epidemic in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean and UNAIDS Middle East and North Africa regions have led me to call for this meeting.

Despite our joint efforts, people living with HIV in the Region are not accessing life-saving antiretroviral treatment. At the end of 2011, less than 14% of those in need of treatment were receiving it. This is in stark contrast to the rest of the world where HIV treatment coverage is nearing 60%. In fact, today, several low- and middle-income countries in other regions have achieved the universal access target of 80% treatment coverage.

Equally disturbing is the increase in the number of new HIV infections in recent years in our region, while elsewhere in the world, HIV incidence is on the decline.

Most of the people living with HIV remain undiagnosed and are therefore unable to benefit from treatment. Additionally, prevention and treatment interventions often do not reach those most at risk, while stigma and discrimination continue to be a major barrier to utilization of services.

There have been numerous international and regional declarations and national strategic plans. However, in the majority of countries, current commitment and efforts are not translating into any significant progress in achieving treatment targets.

We know what needs to be done. We need to create demand for services and ensure that people living with HIV are diagnosed early, are linked to care, receive quality treatment and are retained in lifelong care. Countries need to improve the quality of existing interventions and urgently scale up those interventions that work. Strategies and policies that do not work need to be discarded and innovative approaches developed to reach key populations at higher risk.

It is true that there are considerable challenges, but it is also true that there are many opportunities. The price of safe and effective antiretroviral drugs has decreased substantially over the years, and normative guidance reflecting the latest scientific knowledge is readily available. There is a wealth of experience and best practices on models of service delivery that work in different epidemic contexts and many partners and important donors have invested in the HIV response.

We urgently need to transform the current response. We cannot remain the only region in the world that is falling behind, especially now, when exciting new developments in the response to HIV are taking place, when with renewed optimism the world is talking about *ending* the HIV epidemic.

Treatment is fundamental to achieving an AIDS-free generation. In addition to reducing morbidity and mortality, HIV treatment also reduces transmission. We cannot let this opportunity remain untapped. We must do more to garner both the individual and the public health benefits of treatment.

Through the launch of the 'Regional initiative to end the HIV treatment crisis', WHO reaffirms its commitment to working with countries and partners to find solutions and innovative ways to rapidly scale up services and move closer to global targets. The presence today of the Directors of WHO, UNAIDS and the Global Fund is testament to the urgency of the problem and the shared commitment.

In partnership with UNAIDS we have produced a report that highlights successful approaches by countries in our Region, as well as the persistent challenges relating to reaching a larger number of people in need of HIV treatment with quality services. The report offers a set of recommendations for urgent action to be taken by countries to

accelerate access to HIV treatment. Today we have the great pleasure to present and discuss this report with you.

We are now at a defining moment, the deadline for the Millennium Development Goals is almost upon us. Let us not miss this opportunity to work harder to deliver on the pledges made and to prepare ourselves to embrace new directions in the response to HIV beyond 2015.