



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

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REGIONAL DIRECTOR

WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

on the occasion of

WORLD TB DAY

24 March 2012

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Tuberculosis – TB – is not new to mankind. Its traces have been found in Egyptian mummies dating back thousands of years. This devastating infectious disease is preventable, and can be diagnosed and treated at a cost of just 25 US dollars per person. Yet it continues to play havoc with the lives of hundreds and thousands of people across the globe in general, and in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region in particular. In 2010 alone, there were around a million cases of TB in the 23 countries of the Region. One million cases of an infectious disease which is preventable and curable...What are we doing to stop it?

The 24th of March marks the day in 1882 when Dr Robert Koch detected the cause of TB, the TB bacillus. World TB Day, every year, reminds us not to be complacent in our fight against this centuries-old disease. In 2012, the Day will be commemorated with the slogan “*Stop TB in my lifetime*”. This message conveys both the urgency of our fight against TB, the 2015 target of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and the targets set by the global Stop TB Partnership.

Across the Region, we have seen hard work, commitment and dedication from health workers, TB programme managers, and WHO’s partners, from far-off villages in Afghanistan to crowded cities in Morocco. Between 2008 and 2010, the TB case detection rate gradually and consistently increased to reach 63%. Eighty-eight per cent (88%) of infectious cases detected were successfully treated. Care for drug-resistant forms of TB was expanded.

Innovative partnerships were developed between the public and private sectors, including civil society, TB-affected communities, donors, business and media. Nevertheless, 37% of the total estimated number of TB cases are missed every year. Needless to say, these cases remain untreated. Not only does this mean unnecessary suffering for those affected, but it also means the transmission cycle is sustained further. Where and why are we lagging behind?

Nine countries (Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Islamic Republic of Iran, Morocco, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen) contribute to 95% of the tuberculosis burden of the Eastern Mediterranean Region as a whole. Despite success in the expansion of diagnosis and treatment services, there are still a number of important challenges. Collaboration with the private health sector needs strengthening. Surveillance does not currently give a true picture of the situation and needs improving. Laboratory services are present but also need to be improved. TB/HIV coinfection has not been addressed adequately and continues to pose a challenge to both national TB and AIDS control programmes in the Region. While evidence increasingly indicates a rising number of drug-resistant cases in the Region, expansion of multi drug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) care has been slow.

These challenges confront us in our fight against TB at a time when international investment in health faces one of its worst times. The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which played an instrumental role in scaling up TB care to reach millions of patients in the Region, has announced cancellation of the latest call for proposals and has frozen funding until 2014. Other donors are facing serious financial challenges also.

2012 and the years ahead will be critical in our struggle against a disease which has challenged health and development for millions across the Region. To meet the Millennium Development Goals 2015 targets and those of the Stop TB Partnership, we need to move, and move faster. New diagnostic tools are set to reach the market. The cost of treatment is going down. Awareness of TB is rising. Governments are committed, more than ever before, to finally controlling this disease. Partnerships are thriving, with non-traditional partners joining us. The voice of TB patients is louder and clearer, and they are demanding faster action. This is an enabling environment and can help us to achieve control of TB in our lifetime.

Let us continue forward with renewed vision, vigour and passion. Let us aim for zero deaths from TB and a world free from TB. I wish you every success on this World TB Day and celebrate the success so far and the passion to do more and better.