



Message from

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WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

on the occasion of

WORLD TUBERCULOSIS DAY

24 March 2016

Thursday 24 March is World TB Day. The day is a reminder that the preventable and curable disease of tuberculosis is still a threat to human life and prosperity. It is 25 years since tuberculosis was declared a global health emergency by the World Health Organization. However, in the global tuberculosis report 2015, WHO still ranked it, along with HIV, as a leading cause of death due to communicable diseases. In 2014, more than 9.6 million people contracted the disease and 1.5 million people died from it. Drug-resistant TB is a major challenge. Currently, only one in every four cases of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis is detected and only one in two is cured. The situation is a stark reminder that tuberculosis continues to retain its status as a grave public health threat.

In 2014, the World Health Assembly approved a new global strategy to end TB. The strategy builds on the successes achieved by two major public health approaches for prevention and control in the recent past. These were the DOTS strategy and the Stop TB Strategy. The End TB Strategy 2016–2035 envisions a world free of tuberculosis by pursuing policies and systems that promote prevention and care, and that encourage research and innovative approaches. World TB Day is an opportunity to affirm our commitment to end tuberculosis following the path set by the strategy and the Sustainable Development Goals, namely goal 3.3 related to communicable disease including tuberculosis. Tuberculosis will continue to be an important target in the post MDG era and Member States and the international community will be regularly monitored on the progress they make in the relevant target under the Sustainable Development Goals.

The theme of World TB Day 2016 is “Unite to End TB”. The theme reflects the dire situation that the global community – donors, health workers, private sector and academia – must

address. It is a rallying call to pool efforts, join resources, plan well and make a combined push to put an end to the suffering of the millions affected by this disease. Often labelled as a “disease of the poor”, tuberculosis does indeed affect the poor more than other segments of society. But evidence confirms that national economies suffer too as a result of tuberculosis and that the collective prosperity and progress of all is compromised. Clearly, everyone has a stake in the fight against tuberculosis. Unless we unite, this fight will go on and TB will continue to win. The call on this World TB Day to “Unite to End TB” reflects the urgency of the action that we need to take together.

In the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region, we have made progress. The Region is one of four WHO regions that met the target to halve the tuberculosis mortality rate by 2015 compared with 1990 estimates. National control programmes, health workers, donors, activists and communities have persistently struggled to provide tuberculosis care services amid the chaos and uncertainty posed by conflicts and disasters in countries of the Region in recent years.

The progress against all odds in the Region’s fight against tuberculosis is significant. However, there are also major obstacles still to overcome. Despite the availability of low cost diagnosis and treatment, about 40% of the estimated TB cases in 2014 in our Region were missed or not reported. This is a major challenge for ending the tuberculosis epidemic, as it sustains tuberculosis transmission and constitutes a major risk for individual patients who are not diagnosed and treated. The Region did not meet the globally agreed target of 50% reduction in prevalence rate by 2015 compared with 1990 estimates. Diagnosis of, and care for, multidrug-resistant TB and TB/HIV co-infection is unacceptably low. The goal of the End TB Strategy will not be achieved unless we unite and address these gaps. To do so, we need to ensure strong political commitment translated into appropriate financial and human resources. We also need to improve and strengthen the managerial capacity of national programmes, improve tuberculosis surveillance and the laboratory network, extend tuberculosis care and control services within the primary health care network, involve all the relevant care providers including the public sector and private sector, and strengthen case identification among high-risk groups.

World TB Day alerts us to the needs and realities of the fight. In a Region where conflict has seriously affected public health services in eight countries, innovative approaches are needed to reach out to undiagnosed cases in the community. I am pleased to say that the Regional Office has recently launched a guide on implementing control activities in complex

emergencies. In other countries, stability in the economy and in the health system should continue to benefit tuberculosis control, and efforts should be made towards elimination. For high-burden countries, a mix of proven strategies and innovative approaches are needed to stop the epidemic. The WHO regional and country teams are at the forefront of these efforts. Unity is what we need today to end the suffering of people in the Region.

Let us mark this World TB Day with renewed commitment and confidence. United, we will end TB.

Thank you.