



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

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to the

WORKSHOP ON ETHICAL ISSUES IN REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH RESEARCH

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Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have great pleasure in welcoming you to this training workshop on ethical issues in reproductive health research starting here today in the new building of the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean.

At the outset I must express my deep sense of gratitude to our colleagues from the Special Programme of Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction in Geneva, for their valuable support and contribution in bringing about this training workshop.

Indeed, this workshop is a very special and important activity. It includes an eminent group of scientists and experts who are interested in research in reproductive health and have distinguished experience in this field. It also brings together members of the Scientific and

Ethical Review Group of the Human Reproduction Programme, along with reproductive health programme managers, ethicists, biomedical and social scientists and epidemiologists from countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

I regard this workshop with special interest as it highlights a priority issue in reproductive health, focusing as it does on ethical standards and practices in reproductive health research activities. It is an excellent opportunity for full interaction between participants, with open and free discussion and exchange of information, experience and advice concerning ethical issues in human reproductive health research. It will enrich our knowledge, and help us to better meet the reproductive health needs in countries of the Region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you are well aware, the importance of reproductive health as an essential component of general health has been increasingly established in almost all countries of the Region. Hence, the need to integrating the existing, fragmented services into the national health care system through a holistic approach to reproductive health is receiving special attention at both the regional and national levels. Specific focus has been placed on safe-motherhood related programmes and activities, including antenatal, obstetric, postpartum and perinatal health care and family planning, as a priority component of reproductive health in all countries of the Region.

At the same time, other components are emerging as priority areas in the national programmes on reproductive health. Practices harmful to reproductive health such as female genital mutilation, reproductive tract infections, sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS, reproductive health in adolescence and after menopause, post-abortion medical complications, cancers of the reproductive system, premarital and pre-conception counselling, genetic counselling and neonatal screening for inherited disorders, are all among these priority areas in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

However, the development of reproductive health programmes still faces challenges in those countries of the Region where the concept of integrated reproductive health care is only

partially realized and needs to be further advocated. Moreover, information on the major determinants of reproductive ill health throughout the life span is still not sufficiently adequate to enable a strategic and evidence-based approach to reproductive health policy-making and planning at both regional and country levels.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In view of this situation, reproductive health research is regarded as an area of strategic priority for both programme development and programme implementation. The Regional Office has been striving towards making research a major component of national reproductive health programmes in close collaboration with the Reproductive Health and Research Department of WHO headquarters, as well as sister UN agencies and other concerned international and nongovernmental organizations. In the past decade, the Regional Office has organized several intercountry consultations and workshops in order to identify priority research areas in reproductive health in Member States and to put the areas identified high on the agenda of the reproductive health programmes at the regional and national levels.

The Gulf Family Health Survey Project, which was implemented by the Executive Board of the Health Ministers' Council for Gulf Cooperation Council States and concluded in 2000, was an excellent demonstration of successful collaboration between the Regional Office, UN sister agencies, international organizations and the GCC States, and provided a database for developing family health programmes in the GCC States.

The Pan Arab Project for Family Health (PAP-FAM), which is currently being executed by the League of Arab States in collaboration with the Regional Office, along with AGFUND, UNICEF, UNFPA and other international organizations, is another successful collaborative research project in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The Project is planned to be implemented in 12 Member States in 2001–2004, and is aimed at providing detailed information on the health, social and environmental status of the family and their underlying determinants. This information will provide the basis of an accurate and reliable database which will help to sharpen our knowledge about priority areas in family reproductive health issues in the participating countries.

Dear Colleagues,

Over the past three decades, the Special Programme for Research Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction, in collaboration with WHO regional offices and countries, has built up an extensive international network of centres with which it collaborates in the design and implementation of research products in various aspects of human reproduction. Ethical guidelines and practices put in place by the Programme require all proposals for research projects involving human subjects to be within the established ethical codes of research in human reproduction. In 1992, the Scientific and Ethical Review Group (SERG) of the Programme discussed a report on quality assurance for ethics in research involving human subjects. The report highlighted the problem that, while ethical guidelines exist, it is not clear to what extent ethical issues are uniformly understood or debated across centres, nor in what way institutional ethical review is carried out. A survey carried out at the request of SERG among the WHO Collaborating Centres in Human Reproduction Research indicated that a wide variety of concepts and standards were being used by these institutions in their ethics review procedures. This led to the recommendation that the Special Programme should institute regional workshops devoted to the principles of ethics in research in the field of human reproduction. In response to this recommendation, and in order to enhance the awareness of, and adherence to, ethical standards and practices in reproductive health research, WHO initiated a series of regional workshops on ethical issues in research in reproductive health.

We are here today to stimulate discussion on, and encourage ethical practices in reproductive health research among scientists and clinicians and other individuals who may be current or potential future members of ethics review committees in countries of the Region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am confident that the training workshop will achieve its objectives with admirable success and provide future direction to our activities in the crucial area of research in reproductive health.