



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

DR HUSSEIN A. GEZAIRY

REGIONAL DIRECTOR

WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

WHO GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS MEETING

Cairo, Egypt, 11–12 February 2007

It is a pleasure to welcome you here at the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. I would like to congratulate you all on the new WHO Communications Strategy. Over the years there has been a growing number of partners working in the health field. One of our main challenges is to continue to maintain our image as the leading UN health agency. This requires a great deal of work, especially on your part as communicators.

We might ask ourselves: how visible is the work of WHO? We are always there on the ground, whether we are referring to emergency situations such as earthquakes, wars, floods or to emerging diseases. However, what is absolutely vital is that we communicate to the public, and never has this been more essential than now, with the looming threat of a global influenza pandemic.

The first step towards achieving this goal is to build trust and credibility, and in WHO we have been very fortunate in this regard. We have our annual “world days” such

as World Health Day, World No Tobacco Day, World AIDS Day, World Blood Donor Day, etc. to keep the public informed about what we are doing and how much progress has been made, as well as to raise awareness of specific issues. Now, however, we need to expand on this—we need to think of ways to mobilize resources, improve our internal communications and keep ourselves updated on the ever-evolving new methods of communication.

WHO has a wealth of scientific material at its disposal. This poses a major challenge for us, both to simplify this knowledge and to make it accessible to the public. It is time for communications to be recognized as an important area of work in itself and not merely an add-on. This might mean identifying resources, both financial and human. As it stands, communications in WHO is an intercountry programme at regional level. However it is not a specific area of work and therefore this may make it difficult for our WHO Representatives to discuss activities related to advocacy and communication with their counterparts.

As you are all aware, effective communication and methods of reaching the public differ in each Region. In this part of the world, television plays a major part in people's lives—far more so than the internet—and in educating the public. A recent survey showed that, following the media campaign on avian flu implemented in Egypt, 86% could recall messages from television broadcasts, whereas 9% recalled seeing printed campaign materials and only 3% had actually participated in community meetings or seminars about avian flu.

I trust your deliberations will consider these issues. We need to see how best to increase WHO's visibility and indeed, there are many lessons to be learned from each Region. You are strongly encouraged to share these lessons with each other. Share your vision and together we can see how we can move forward.

Thank you.