In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

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FIFTH REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION HEALTH SCIENCES VIRTUAL LIBRARY: BUILDING THE PUBLIC HEALTH KNOWLEDGE NETWORK

Cairo, Egypt, 18–20 November 2007

Your Excellency, Colleagues,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the Fifth Regional Conference on the Eastern Mediterranean Region Health Sciences Virtual Library: Building the Public Health Knowledge Network, Cairo, 18-20 November 2007. After four successful regional conferences, held in Beirut, Tehran, Karachi and Cairo, and more than 20 years after the Regional Committee resolution to develop a viable regional library network, it is time to pause and review our achievements, problem areas and future steps.

The Regional Committee in its 28th session (EM/RC28A/R.9) recommended that “The Regional Director take further steps for the consolidation of the resources and services of the WHO Regional Medical Library and for the development of a viable regional network for biomedical information”. The Regional Committee in its 53rd session, last year, requested the Regional Director “to develop and sustain the Eastern Mediterranean Knowledge Network (EMRKNet) in collaboration with Member States”. Between these two milestones the whole health information scene has changed. The change has been characterized by the emergence of knowledge management as a public health discipline which requires special skills, resources and tools. The absence of knowledge and knowledge management in the public health sector has serious negative consequences. Mistakes that result from either lack of information or low quality information have a high cost. The proliferation and lack of organization of information is a burden on busy health professionals, while difficulties in
accessing information discourage use of available public health knowledge and create barriers to information sharing.

The main theme of this conference is building the public health knowledge network in the Region. Over the past two decades the Regional Office has been building databases, developing capacity and preparing the building blocks for a regional platform for knowledge sharing and utilization. It is high time now to put these building blocks together in an integrated manner to allow for the full utilization of the knowledge assets that we have built over the years.

This Region is rich in its knowledge resources. Like other regions, we are not making full use of these resources. We know that the knowledge assets in this region are tremendous, but they are also mostly untapped. Knowledge is stored in people’s minds and in documents and databases. One of your responsibilities, as knowledge workers, is to identify these resources and assets, map them and then match them with the needs of health care professionals. The only value of knowledge is when it is exchanged and translated into action.

With the advance in information technologies and the emerging of multidisciplinary health care teams, knowledge workers have a role to play in these teams. We would like to see integrated teams made up of clinicians, communication specialists, psychologists, informaticians and knowledge workers in health care institutions. We would like to see clinical librarians taking their position in hospitals and clinics to support evidence-based medicine, and to provide advanced mentoring and training to medical teams and individuals to find the right answers from the many knowledge resources. We would like to see them providing on-site instruction and support to clinicians, managers and support staff who cannot leave their clinics or offices during rounds or strategic meetings. And we would like to see knowledge workers as part of management teams, contributing to decision-making by provision of information on best practices and evidence-based management.

The role of information and library professionals in the Region in building our knowledge network is critical. We envisage full involvement and participation by all of you in this regional network. In fact it will not be regional and will not be a network unless all partners are fully engaged as contributors to the network and users of its services. The Regional Office would like to develop a mechanism to support Member States. This would have four components.
• Needs assessment. You are closer to the field and you work with our target user groups. The Regional Office publishes many publications, reports and documents, as well as several journals and a website. We have a fair idea of the needs, but would like you to be part of this needs assessment to make sure that we are responding to the needs and listening to the voice of health care professionals when we generate, distribute and share knowledge.

• Impact assessment. Gathering feedback from end users, to gauge their evaluation and to measure the impact our information products and knowledge services have had is of paramount importance for us. We receive letters of thanks and appreciation from professionals and institutions in the Region when our services reach them. We need to collect facts and build evidence as to how much these knowledge services and products have influenced professionals in their careers, decision-making and daily practices.

• Knowledge dissemination. Informing end users about knowledge services and products and acting as agents for diffusion of knowledge is at the heart of the knowledge network. We expect you to play a central role in these networking activities.

• Forming active network hubs. The regional knowledge network will only work if you play an active role as contributors and users of the network’s services. The quality, up-to-dateness and comprehensiveness of databases in the network will depend totally on your inputs. You can make it a living and dynamic network rather than a static and decaying one.

Dear Colleagues,

We have set some objectives for this conference which we hope will be achieved with your full engagement and contribution. These are to: review activities and achievements made to develop the Regional Virtual Health Sciences Library (Review of progress since October 2004); discuss specific networking activities such as the Union List, Journals consortium and regional training; launch the Eastern Mediterranean Region Knowledge Network; review proposed changes and updates to the Medical Library Handbook; review national plans for knowledge management and sharing; and discuss the role of national institutions in development of the Eastern Mediterranean Region Knowledge Network.

We have dedicated one day for training on network tools. Special training will be provided on the tools for development of the Global Health Library (GHL). The GHL is
another effort to pool resources and knowledge assets at a global level. Your contribution and partnership in this effort is encouraged. Global efforts can only succeed if there is enough conviction at the regional and local level that these are needed and useful.

I wish you a pleasant stay in Cairo and most fruitful deliberations. I look forward to seeing the results of your work in the form of a plan of action at country level for the next steps and for further collaboration.

Thank you.