The threat to global health and security from the emergence of new viruses and from the potential of viruses to cross the species barrier is very real as has been demonstrated by the relatively recent experiences with severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003, HINI in 2009 and avian influenza reported since 1997. Thus the occurrence in June and September this year of 2 cases of severe respiratory illness linked to a new human coronavirus caused widespread concern. The cases originated from Saudi Arabia and Qatar and we present in this issue an editorial discussing the incident, the implications and what needs to be done in our Region to be prepared for such events and contribute to the global strategies in order to safeguard public health.

As well as the emergence of new viruses, another major threat to global health and safety is the increasing antimicrobial resistance across the world. At the same time, there is a dearth of new antimicrobial medicines being developed and coming onto the market. The most alarming potential consequence of these two realities is a world without effective medicines to combat infectious diseases, a return to a pre-antibiotic era. The impact on global health and all other aspects of life can be imagined. While there is a need for concerted research efforts to develop new antimicrobial medicines, at the same time we need to extend as long as possible the shelf-life of the medicines that are currently available. This requires not only the rational prescribing of medicines but also surveillance on trends in emerging resistance in microorganisms, and strong government commitment to both these strategies is vital. A paper from Saudi Arabia examined the drug prescribing performance of primary health care centres in Eastern province using the WHO/International Network of Rational Use of Drugs core drug prescribing indicators. The study reports that the percentage of encounters with an antibiotic prescribed was 32.2%; this is marginally higher than the optimal value recommended (≥ 30%).

Another study in Morocco determined the causes of invasive bacterial diseases in children and the antibiotic susceptibility of the organisms. While antibiotic resistance rates were not very high, the authors concluded that efforts that were needed to control the increase in the rates and recommended the need for a policy on judicious antibiotic use in Morocco.