

Meeting of the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Technical Advisory Group (RTAG) on Immunization¹

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Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean held a meeting of the Regional Technical Advisory Group (RTAG) on Immunization on 13–14 April 2020 (1). The meeting was conducted virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The objectives of the meeting were to: review regional progress, challenges and constraints facing the achievement of the goals of the Eastern Mediterranean Vaccine Action Plan (EMVAP) (2); brief RTAG members on regional progress in verification of elimination of measles and rubella and hepatitis B control; discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on regional immunization programmes and measures to mitigate it.

Summary of discussions

Eight of the 10 members of the RTAG attended the meeting, along

with staff from the UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office, UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia and WHO Regional Office. Dr Yvan Hutin, Director, Communicable Diseases Control, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, underlined the importance of the RTAG in guiding the implementation of vaccination services in the Region, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. He provided a brief overview of the epidemiology of COVID-19 in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region and its potential impact on immunization programmes, emphasizing the need for the continuity of essential health services. Dr Ziad Memish, RTAG chairperson, also welcomed participants and affirmed the role of the RTAG in supporting immunization programmes in the Region. The meeting was chaired by Dr Ziad Memish and Dr Ezzeddine Mohsni, RTAG vice-chairperson. The discussion included: reviewing the standard operating procedures of the RTAG; immunization programmes in the Region in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; progress and

challenges in achieving the goals of the EMVAP; routine immunization; disease elimination and control; new and underutilized vaccine introduction; immunization data; quality verification of VPD, as well as elimination and control targets.

Recommendations

To WHO

WHO should communicate with national immunization programmes for a response, copying in NITAG chairpersons, and WHO and UNICEF country offices, for information and provide support to national EPI programmes.

To Member States

Documenting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on national immunization programmes, monitoring vaccine availability and take the necessary action to ensure that records are kept of children who have missed vaccination during the pandemic.

Making plans for catch-up vaccination of missed children, using appropriate strategies, as soon as possible when the COVID-19 pandemic situation allows.

Involving the NITAG, relevant partners and stakeholders in decision-making on the implementation of immunization activities during the COVID-19 pandemic and in planning for catch-up vaccination of missed children as soon as possible.

Designing appropriate strategies for the integrated delivery of essential services during the pandemic where possible, and in the post-pandemic period.

In the context of COVID-19 and the possible reduction of routine vaccination coverage, delayed implementation of preventive vaccination campaigns and potential increase in incidence of VPDs, countries of the Region should maintain high quality VPD surveillance and alert functions to ensure the early detection of VPD outbreaks and a timely response to them.

References:

1. World Health Organization Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. Meeting of the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Technical Advisory Group (RTAG) on Immunization (<https://applications.emro.who.int/docs/whoemepi358e-eng.pdf?ua=1>).
2. World Health Organization Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. Eastern Mediterranean Vaccine Action Plan (EMVAP): 2016-2020. (https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/311578/EMROPUB_2019_EN_22331.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

¹ This summary is extracted from the report on the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Technical Advisory Group (RTAG) on Immunization, virtual meeting, 13-14 April 2020 (Microsoft Word - EPI-358-Final small (who.int) <https://applications.emro.who.int/docs/whoemepi358e-eng.pdf?ua=1>)