

**REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE  
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN  
Sixty-ninth Session  
Cairo, Egypt, 10–13 October 2022**

**October 2022**

**STRENGTHENING PALLIATIVE CARE IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN  
REGION**

**Objectives of the event**

On 11 October 2022, a side event will be held on strengthening palliative care in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. A video to introduce the work of the Eastern Mediterranean Region Expert Network on Palliative Care will be followed by a keynote presentation and a discussion with five palliative care experts.

The objectives of the event are to:

- raise awareness on palliative care and on the public health needs for palliative care in the Region;
- share the concept of early introduction and integration of palliative care in national health systems, as well as its role in the management of serious life-threatening illnesses; and
- introduce the Eastern Mediterranean Region Expert Network on Palliative Care and its ongoing work to enable the inclusion of palliative care services in basic packages of health services.

**Background**

WHO defines palliative care as an approach that aims to improve the quality of life of patients and their families when facing problems associated with life-threatening illness. Often associated with cancer and end-of-life care, palliative care is required for a wide range of other chronic diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, respiratory diseases, AIDS and diabetes. Early palliative care not only improves the quality of life for patients but also reduces unnecessary hospitalizations and use of health care services.

Palliative care is explicitly recognized under the human right to health. At the global level, the World Health Assembly adopted resolution WHA67.19 in 2014, calling upon WHO and Member States to improve access to palliative care as a core component of health systems, with an emphasis on primary health care and community/home-based care, and stressing the importance of palliative care for the achievement of universal health coverage. Furthermore, WHO explicitly recognizes that palliative care is part of the comprehensive services required for noncommunicable diseases in the Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of NCDs 2013–2020 and is fundamental for improving the quality of life and human dignity for individuals.

Access to palliative care services remains low in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, where only an estimated 1% of adults who are in need of palliative care actually receive it. This is despite the increasing morbidity from noncommunicable diseases and an aging population, which have led to an increased prevalence of serious health-threatening illnesses that require early palliative care interventions to ensure a good quality of life, necessary care, and effective pain and symptom relief. Barriers to access to palliative care include a lack of awareness among policy-makers, health care professionals and the public about what palliative care really is and, as a consequence, a total lack of national policies, funding and human resource capacity.

Strengthening palliative care in the Region is necessary both from a human rights perspective and as a cost-saving public health intervention, as well as being a means to achieve universal health coverage in line with the commitments of Member States. In September 2019, the Eastern Mediterranean Region Expert Network on Palliative Care was established to provide technical input to WHO in informing palliative care-related health policy in countries.

## **Challenges in the Region**

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, there are many misconceptions about palliative care, its purpose, its public health benefits and its importance for a high quality of care. Palliative care is a fairly new field of medicine and many Member States have not yet incorporated it in undergraduate curricula, nor is it an established field of medical specialization in many countries, which affects the availability and adequacy of the necessary workforce. Few Member States have national policies on palliative care, and where they are available, they are often applicable primarily for oncology patients – even if the need extends far beyond cancer. In addition, ongoing humanitarian emergencies and protracted crises in the Region affect the prioritization and incorporation of palliative care in countries' health care systems.

## **Expected outcomes**

- awareness raised on palliative care and the work of the Eastern Mediterranean Region Expert Network on Palliative Care;
- knowledge shared on how to integrate palliative care into national health systems to meet the needs of patients with serious life-threatening illnesses;
- agreement on the key steps to be taken by Member States to increase the prioritization of palliative care and shape national policies that improve access to palliative care.