Organisation mondiale de la Santé

Région Méditerranée orientale

World Health Organization

Eastern Mediterranean Region

منظمة الصحة العالمية

إقليم شرق المتوسط

**REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN**
Seventy-first Session
Doha, Qatar, 14–17 October 2024

September 2024

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FOR ACHIEVING UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE AND HEALTH SECURITY: NURTURING THE OPPORTUNITIES AND MITIGATING THE RISKS

Objectives of the event

A panel discussion will be held on 16 October 2024 on the risks and opportunities of using artificial intelligence (AI) to achieve universal health coverage and health security.

The objectives of the event are to:

- discuss and explore the risks and opportunities of deploying responsible AI technologies to enhance equitable health outcomes;
- support the science-based adoption of AI for health;
- nurture opportunities for joint action on AI for health between Member States of the Region; and
- highlight priority options to enhance the capacities of health ministries in governing the use of AI in the health sector.

Background

Achieving the vision of health for all and accelerating progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires leveraging all assets in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and beyond to achieve a positive impact on population health. AI and related technologies[1] are playing an increasingly important role in health care initiatives and health service provision worldwide. As underscored during the Seventy-seventh World Health Assembly in May 2024, AI has the potential to transform global health.

This panel discussion is in line with current global initiatives on digital health and the Regional strategy for fostering digital health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region 2023–2027 (endorsed by the Regional Committee at its 69th session in October 2022 through resolution EM/RC69/R.6). The response to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated many opportunities for the use of digital health solutions and AI in the health sector. The experience also demonstrated the need for better coordination and governance of the use of such solutions to ensure their efficiency, data security and safety, and positive impact on health outcomes.

To date, AI has contributed to many advances in health in areas such as quality of patient care, diagnostic services, drug development, health service administration, identification of abuse or misuse of services, disease surveillance and outbreak response. There is also immense potential for AI to be used to enhance access to care, reduce human resource shortages, mitigate the risk of error in clinical decision-making and

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[1] AI "refers to the capability of algorithms integrated into systems and tools to learn from data so that they can perform automated tasks without explicit programming of every step by a human." From: Ethics and governance of artificial intelligence for health. Guidance on large multi-modal models. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2024 (https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/375579/9789240084759-eng.pdf?sequence=1, accessed 9 September 2024). Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO

enhance overall health system efficiency. AI is already being used to facilitate research for health and to enable the use of evidence to inform decision-making.

However, many AI based innovations are still in their infancy and a long way from widespread and impactful application within health systems. There are also concerns about the health sector's readiness and capacity for governing and regulating the use of AI, including the need to mitigate any ethical risks or potential risks of widening existing inequities in health care access and health outcomes. AI applications need to be harnessed and utilized in an ethical, responsible and inclusive way towards achieving universal health coverage and enhancing health security.

The panel discussion will provide an opportunity to engage senior policy-makers from the Region on the need for prudent and regulated use of AI to enhance equitable health outcomes. The session aims to nurture opportunities for joint action between countries of the Region on AI for health and to bring key United Nations partners together in response to country priorities.

Opportunities and considerations for the Region

The use of AI is increasing exponentially in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, and it is crucial that national health systems keep pace with the technological advances and developments. There is a need to give greater attention to AI for health and to enhance the capacities of health ministries regarding its governance and use in the health sector. Although there are good examples of the use of AI in the Region and "home-grown" solutions exist in several countries, capacities in AI for health are still at the development stage in many Member States. This presents an opportunity to ensure that innovations generated in countries can contribute to achieving universal health coverage, health security and equitable health outcomes.

Many national information systems in the Region suffer from issues related to poor quality and coverage of data. AI offers opportunities to improve health information systems and strengthen national health data. In addition, effective AI solutions themselves benefit from reliable data sources in order to remain relevant to the context they serve. Ongoing global and regional initiatives to enhance health information systems and utilize digital health technologies can be harnessed to ensure the effective deployment of AI for health and appropriate regulation, in line with national priorities.

Expected outcomes

- Key areas of action proposed for enhancing prudent use of AI in the health sector.
- Avenues created for closer collaboration between the health sector, academic institutions and the telecommunication sector for advancing the effective use of AI.

Composition of the panel

The panel will be composed of a minister of health and a minister of technology from the Region, a representative from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the WHO Regional Director, a representative from WHO headquarters and an academic from the AI field. The session will be moderated by the directors of the Department of Science, Information and Dissemination and the WHO Health Emergencies Programme of the Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. There will be dedicated time for questions and interventions from Member States.