

Statement of Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean on World Patient Safety Day 2022

17 September 2022

This year, “Medication Safety” has been selected as the theme for World Patient Safety Day under the slogan “Medication Without Harm”, with a call to action to “Know, Check and Ask”.

Medication harm accounts for 50% of the overall preventable harm in medical care, making it an urgent global public health concern. It also presents a huge global financial burden, contributing 9% of total avoidable costs due to suboptimal medicine use, or the equivalent of US\$ 42 billion of global total health expenditure.

Medication errors occur when weak medication systems and/or human factors such as fatigue, poor environmental conditions or staff shortages affect prescribing, transcribing, dispensing, administration and monitoring practices, which can then result in severe harm, disability and even death.

In low- and middle-income countries, current estimates suggest that 134 million adverse events occur in hospitals, contributing to around 2.6 million patient deaths every year. While in high-income countries, one in every 10 patients is harmed while receiving hospital care. Patients living in low-income countries experience twice as many disability-adjusted life years lost due to medication-related harm than those in high-income countries, despite a number of available interventions that could reduce the frequency and impact of medication errors and whose implementation in countries remains uneven.

In the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region, a research study conducted in selected hospitals found that therapeutic and medication errors accounted for 34% of the total number of adverse events. Data also show that up to 18% of hospital admissions in the Region are associated with severe patient harm due to management of care, 80% of which are preventable.

A significant consequence of unsafe health care is the psychological cost to patients and their families. The resulting human suffering, emotional impact and loss of trust in the health system hamper the utilization of health services, jeopardizing efforts to increase access to health services.

The highest rates of preventable medication-related harm occur in elderly patient care settings (11%), followed by intensive care (7%), highly specialized or surgical care (6%), and emergency medicine (5%), and at least 26% of preventable medication harm is clinically severe or life-threatening. During pharmaceutical care, most harm occurs in prescribing and monitoring medications.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the risk of medication errors and medication-induced harm.

Delivering safe care and ensuring patient safety is more complex in emergency contexts, especially in countries in the Region that face conditions of insecurity, conflict and vulnerability. Universal health coverage depends on the ability of the health system to provide safe, timely and effective services to all people, everywhere, including in emergency settings.

In our efforts to prevent medication errors and reduce medication-related harm we need to join hands with key stakeholders and partners to raise global and regional awareness of this urgent public health problem and empower patients and families to be actively engaged in the safe use of medication. This is the core of our regional vision of “Health for all by all – a call for solidarity and action”.

World Patient Safety Day aims to engage the public, increase awareness and enhance understanding of the burden of unsafe care and the ways to promote patient safety as a cornerstone of modern health care. It also aims to scale up implementation of WHO’s third global patient safety challenge, “Medication Without Harm”, and to advocate for urgent action to improve medication safety.

On World Patient Safety Day, WHO is calling for patients and families to be empowered in the safe use of medication, and for all stakeholders to accelerate the actions necessary to promote safe medication practices.

I also call upon everyone, including governments, nongovernmental organizations, professional organizations, civil society, patient organizations, academia and research institutes, to join the global campaign by lighting up iconic monuments in orange, and organizing international, national and local activities and events on and around 17 September 2022.

Let us all work together to ensure medication without harm.