

**Message from**

**DR AHMED AL-MANDHARI**  
**REGIONAL DIRECTOR**  
**WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION**  
**on the occasion of**  
**WORLD TUBERCULOSIS DAY**

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On World Tuberculosis Day each year we raise public awareness to step up our efforts to end the global tuberculosis (TB) epidemic. TB is one of the world's leading infectious causes of death. Its health, social and economic impacts are truly devastating.

In 2018, a UN High-level Meeting endorsed an ambitious political declaration on ending TB. This led to real progress. According to the 2020 report from the United Nations Secretary-General, in 2018 and 2019 more than 14 million people around the world were treated for TB, more than 6 million received preventive treatment, and deaths from TB decreased.

The COVID-19 pandemic has jeopardized that progress. WHO modelling suggests that globally, there will be hundreds of thousands of additional TB deaths between 2021 and 2025 due to drops in TB notifications and difficulties in accessing TB care. Yet I am pleased to note that many countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region have taken action to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on essential TB services in line with WHO guidance. We have seen innovative people-centred approaches being adopted to ensure continuity of services. We have seen provision of TB treatment at the doorstep of TB patients. We have seen adequate stocks of TB medicines secured for patients without unnecessary visits to treatment centres. We have seen digital technologies used to support patients for communication, counselling and care.

The theme for World TB Day this year is “the clock is ticking”. It is a wake-up call as we are running out of time to act on the commitment to end TB made by world leaders.

TB is preventable and curable. Yet in 2019, WHO estimates that 819 000 people in our Region fell ill with TB. Of those, only 61% were treated – although the treatment success rate for them was 91%, the highest in the world. Drug-resistant TB is still a challenge affecting an estimated 36 000 people in our Region. Only 15% of those have been treated, with a success rate of 64%. TB preventive therapy is only provided to a quarter of eligible people living with HIV, and to less than one in 10 household contacts under 5 years of age.

The clock is ticking. We must accelerate efforts to reach the targets set in the UN political declaration, WHO's End TB Strategy and the Sustainable Development Goals. We must close

the gap in finding missing cases as part of the efforts to increase universal health coverage. Integration within primary health care at community level will make services accessible to populations. We need to scale up systematic screening (FIND.TREAT.ALL. #ENDTB). We need to expand access to the fully oral treatment regimens that WHO recommends for patients with drug-resistant TB. We need to expand access to TB preventive treatment to stop infections from developing into disease.

Overall, we need multisectoral action and accountability to address the socioeconomic determinants of disease. This can only happen if we maintain high-level political commitment backed up by increased domestic funding to end TB in synergy with the response to COVID-19. And it can only happen if we work together, hand in hand, with all relevant global, regional and national partners – and most importantly, with the communities affected by this dreadful disease. Only then will we achieve our regional vision of health for all, by all.

We have to act now to fulfil the global commitment to defeat this disease. It is time to END TB.