

Summary report on the

**Joint EMRO/ISESCO regional training  
workshop for media, a partner in the  
path towards Health for All**

Manama, Bahrain  
27–29 November 2007



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Document WHO-EM/INF/010/E/10.08/27

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## **1. Introduction**

The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (EMRO) in collaboration with the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) organized a regional training workshop entitled Media, a partner in the path towards Health for All in Manama, Bahrain from 27 to 29 November 2007. The objectives of the workshop were to:

- Reiterate WHO's "Health for All" message and highlight the importance of health messages as an integrated part of primary health care;
- Discuss the role of the media in eliminating the exposure gap and providing an equal chance for access to health awareness messages for all segments of the society;
- Pinpoint and analyse challenges and obstacles such as language and accent barriers, cultural sensitivities and technological deficiencies that impede wide dissemination of media health messages to the public in different corners of the Region;
- Come up with innovative ideas to exchange media materials of different kinds among Member States and study the establishment of a network through WHO for easy and rapid access to health-related media materials throughout the Region;
- Share experiences of different countries on production of health messages, selection of appropriate media outlet to reach their respective target audiences and their success stories in collaboration between media and health sectors.

The workshop was attended by media professionals representing television channels, radio and newspapers and health experts from Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia and Yemen. It was also attended by representatives of the Islamic

Educational, Scientific and cultural Organization (ISESCO) and staff from WHO headquarters and Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean.

H.E Dr Faisal Al Hammar, Minister of Health, Bahrain inaugurated the regional workshop. Dr Al Hammar described media as a major resource for education, awareness and attitude change for all age groups. He highlighted the need to come up with innovative and effective health messages in order to raise health awareness among the public. A video message from Dr Hussein Gezairy, Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, was displayed in the opening session. In his message, Dr Gezairy noted that utilization of media to reach the public, raise awareness and overcome communication barriers could contribute to progress towards the goal of Health for All. He reiterated the need to renew commitment to achieving that goal with the partnership of media.

Representing ISESCO, Dr Abdel Aziz Al Jeboury addressed the workshop regarding the responsibility of both the health and media sectors towards society at a time where decision-makers can seem to have lost control over the huge number of satellite channels and cross-cultural media. He said that the general knowledge gap was being used by some media to convey certain beliefs and achieve their own agenda without considering the development needs of their societies.

## **2. Conclusions**

The training course used a variety of communication methods including interactive methods, role-play, work group discussions and writing and evaluation sessions to assess health messages produced by different countries.

Radio, television and print material produced by the participants themselves were displayed with brief presentations to show how media tackled health issues such as avian influenza, tobacco control, AIDS, etc. WHO's new communication strategy was discussed and modules included in this strategy were used for practical training.

To promote understanding of WHO's work and improve cooperation between the media and the Organization, participants were briefed on WHO's current global health agenda. Ways in which the media could contribute to the achievement and success of the agenda were discussed in light of certain challenges, such as translating the technical and scientific nature of health issues into newsworthy or attractive health messages.

As an example of how health issues can be tackled by the media, the issue of chronic diseases was discussed. Prevailing misconceptions that could be corrected by the media are instead often promoted by the media for reasons such as lack of information, unavailability of sources and the need for media people to update their knowledge about health issues.

As a preparatory step to stimulate thinking regarding new health issues, a brainstorming session was held on the theme of the World Health Day 2008, protecting health from climate change. Participants discussed the extent to which the media considers climate change a priority, in order to help determine how the media would react to other emerging health issues. The discussions that followed showed that it is important to promote nontraditional issues to media personnel first, to create interest in these issues, and hence they can advocate for them.

Role-play was effective in demonstrating good and bad practices in handling health issues, especially sensitive issues such as AIDS. It was noted that the media can sometimes feed stigma against people living with HIV/AIDS rather than helping society to accept them. The media

should focus on raising awareness in the community on the importance of providing care and treatment to people living with HIV/AIDS. As well, positive attitudes play a key role in alleviating denial and encouraging people to undergo HIV testing.

Networking, sharing experiences and exchanging material among media personnel as well as the health sector in the Region can be very effective in enriching relations and bridging the gap between the media and health sectors. This also facilitates the flow of information and can improve understanding of the roles, needs and challenges of each party.

Discussions highlighted the fact that health for all means providing health awareness – as well as health services – to all segments of society, especially in the remote areas where health facilities are either difficult to access or nonexistent. In situations like this, the role of the media in reaching people with health awareness is vital and complementary to the role of the health sector. Because the media is not limited by geographical barriers, it can be used to reach out to populations in remote areas or those affected by emergencies. What needs attention is the quality of the health messages targeting these areas and dealing with emergency situations. Discussions also highlighted the need for health messages to be concise, informative, culturally sensitive, understandable in terms of language and dialect, and relevant.

Finally, there is need to make use of modern technology in the communications field. Pod casts, really simple syndication (RSS) and the internet are increasingly used in the Region as a means to communicate, especially among youth. Health communication should not lag behind in terms of using these channels to disseminate health messages.

### **3. Recommendations**

#### *To the media*

1. Encourage the use of modern technology to improve the quality and widen the spread of health messages in the regional media.
2. Ensure health journalists always verify the accuracy of their news by giving sufficient time for research and avoiding unreliable sources.
3. Establish planning and evaluation units to develop strategies for dissemination of health messages.

#### *To ministries of health*

4. Make up-to-date information on important health issues available to both the media circuit and the public (noting that it is a cumulative, ongoing process).

#### *To ministries of health and the media*

5. Promote “less is more” as a principle in the production of health messages, including the use of easy-to-understand language, concise slogans and simple visuals to make messages more appealing to the public.
6. Build constructive relationships based on collaboration and mutual respect in order to bridge the gap between the media and the health sector in the Region.

*To WHO*

7. Providing practical training to WHO staff and health officials on how to deal with the media, how to face the camera and how to overcome common fears of the media and be available for media enquiries.
8. Encourage health officials to pre-test media messages to determine the best format (e.g. poster, film) and best dissemination mediums (e.g. press, billboards, television, radio) for their target audience.
9. Establish an electronic network that gathers all participants and other media personnel and health staff to share information and materials.
10. Make use of online media training for field staff.
11. Act as a facilitator between national health authorities and the media.
12. Facilitate coverage of health and humanitarian actions in time of emergencies.
13. Sensitize media networks on the importance of emerging health issues that have not received sufficient media attention in the Region, such as climate change.