Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you all to the second regional meeting of National Bioethics Committees in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. This represents a joint collaboration between WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean and the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO). I am confident that the combined experiences of these prestigious organizations in the field of bioethics will enhance and strengthen bioethics programmes to better cope with the emerging bioethical challenges in the Region.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 1970, the word “bioethics” emerged as the bridge between science and humanity in the service of global human health with the sense of preservation of ecology and environment. Bioethics by definition is concerned with the ethical issues and questions that rise in the relationships between biology, environment, law, medicine, politics, philosophy, technology, and theology, thus implying that bioethics is multidisciplinary. In short, bioethics is the study of moral principles in the fields of biomedical research and treatment.
During the past few decades, the world has witnessed a revolution of globalization and in technological knowledge and digitization, resulting in great changes in the medical sciences. Biotechnology is new to the scope of medicine, as is integration of genetic factors as causes of disease in addition to socioeconomic, behavioral and environmental determinants of health. These factors all represent new ethical challenges that have not been addressed previously. The problem is that many middle- and low-income countries lack the bioethics infrastructure to appropriately tackle these emerging trends in research.

The global trend is towards establishing national ethics bodies and committees to review the current bioethics issues and provide executive and legislative sectors as well as the public with advice about bioethics. These committees analyse and reach conclusions and recommendations regarding bioethical issues, with a focus on health ethics. This concentration on health ethics rises from the potential need to develop national policies and adopt legislation in regard to human health and well-being.

At the global level, WHO has been one of the pioneers in the bioethics arena. The Ethics and Health initiative was launched in 2002, responsible for the review and assessment of ethical issues that are raised by activities throughout the Organization. These issues cover a broad array of global bioethics topics, ranging from organ transplant to advancements in genomics and biotechnology. The Department of Ethics, Trade, Human Rights and Health Law at WHO headquarters is responsible for health and ethics issues and serves as the permanent secretariat for the Global Summit of National Bioethics Advisory Bodies. The 7th Global Summit was held in Paris in September of 2008 and the coming meeting will be held in Singapore, July 2010, in conjunction with the 10th World Congress of Bioethics.

At the regional level, the new technologies are challenging values and cultural norms, thereby increasing the gap between global developments in bioethics and dialogue and application of bioethics in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Bioethics needs to become a subject of interest and expertise in the Region. Member States can ensure a better life for their citizens by incorporating bioethical standards into development activities. Among the important forums for this advancement and application are medical schools and academic institutions, where bioethics needs to be introduced and stressed
upon. Bioethics in particular is an issue that cannot be imported or adopted from developed countries. It has to be developed, modelled and shaped according to the culture and norms of each community.

The Eastern Mediterranean Region is diverse in social, cultural and religious norms and consequently the Region must have its own set of guidelines and regulations so that the people of the Member States can draw upon and define codes of ethical practice. A number of countries have been developing a core ethical framework within the context of religious, social and cultural practices in the Region, while at the same time embracing the ethical values and principles of other nations that are not in conflict with the local value systems.

The Regional Office established the Eastern Mediterranean Region Research Ethics Committee (EMR-REC) in March 2006. This Committee was developed as a response to the large and diverse amount of biomedical research conducted in the Region and is responsible for reviewing and approving any research that is supported by the Regional Office, in an attempt to protect human beings and their rights. The Committee also serves as the Regional Office’s link to the global efforts in the field of medical ethics and provides technical support to the Member States in order to develop, build and strengthen national ethical oversight procedures and mechanisms in their respective countries.

The Regional Office is committed to strengthening national bioethics capacities through advocacy consultations, meetings, seminars, workshops, training and research through national and regional level activities. The Regional Office places great importance on capacity-building and strengthening. Therefore, collaboration between the Regional Office and a number of prestigious academic institutions was initiated in an attempt to train and acquaint researchers from the Region in the fundamentals of bioethics. These include a short-term training programme on bioethics with the University of Maryland; a 3-day training programme on medical ethics and establishment of ethics review committees; and a masters degree in bioethics at the University of Toronto, Canada aiming to develop national expertise in bioethics.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

The first meeting of the National Bioethics Committees, held in May 2007, has put the Region on the right track to cooperate and communicate to address the issues related to bioethics. Further improvement in the Region is dependent on allocation and utilization of resources in a better approach to strengthen the field of bioethics. Further training in bioethics is a necessity at the national and regional level to provide a pool of professionals capable of promoting and enhancing bioethical standards in research. The Regional Office is promoting ethics in health by strengthening its cooperation and ties with international and national bodies. The Regional Office also promotes and encourages activities related to technical support in bioethics.

I stress that this vision cannot be achieved without the dedication and cooperation of the national committees. I am confident that together we can set the standards and enhance adherence to a bioethical framework that will promote the well-being and health of individuals in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

I thank you for your attention, and wish you all the best in this meeting and future initiatives in the service of the Region.

Thank you.