



In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from Dr Ala Alwan, Regional Director, WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region on the occasion of World AIDS Day 2013

HIV treatment works

**TREAT
MORE
TREAT
BETTER**



1 December 2013

HIV treatment works! This is the regional theme for this year's World AIDS Day. HIV treatment saves lives. With the advances in scientific evidence, we know now that antiretroviral therapy (ART) has become safer, simpler and more robust. People living with HIV who take ART in the right combination of medicines can lead long and productive lives. We also know that with successful ART, people living with HIV are less likely to transmit the virus to others. They can now prevent the transmission of their infection to their partners. As well, pregnant women living with HIV can now have HIV-free infants. Making ART available on a large scale to those who need it can avert new infections and can eventually curb the HIV epidemic.

Over the past five years, the number of people living with HIV receiving ART in our region has increased more than 4-fold, from around 8000 in 2008 to around 33 000 in 2012. This is the result of the commendable efforts made by countries to raise awareness, make HIV testing and counselling services available, supply antiretroviral medicines and improve access to HIV testing and treatment services.

Nevertheless, despite all the efforts, our region is failing to significantly increase the coverage of ART. As the number of people who are started on ART each year is increasing, the number of new infections is increasing at a faster pace. While access to HIV treatment and care services starts by taking a HIV test, the majority of people living with HIV do not know that they have acquired the infection because they have never taken one. Even when they have been tested for HIV, they are not always linked to care and treatment and may lose contact with the health system for many years, until they return sick and late for their therapy. Furthermore, due to weak health systems, weak governance of HIV care and treatment services and the low quality of services in many Member States, a substantial number of people living with HIV who are receiving ART drop out from treatment. As a result of all this, until today, not even

one in five people living with HIV in our region in need of treatment is actually receiving it.

Certain groups of the population, in particular, are affected more by this failure. Infants, children and people who use drugs suffer even more from the system failures to provide them with ART when they need it.

“Treat more, Treat Better” is the slogan of this campaign. It is a plea to all of us, governments, civil society groups, technical partners and donors to redouble our efforts to rapidly expand access to good quality HIV treatment and care services. We need to fix our sights on the ultimate goal of universal coverage of all those who need treatment with ART. We have to target our HIV testing resources to where HIV infections are most likely to thrive, to where people living with HIV are most likely to seek services for related conditions and to where onward transmission of HIV can be prevented. While reaching out to the people most at risk of HIV, we need to ensure their access to HIV testing and counselling. Thereafter, we need to ensure that every person diagnosed with HIV is linked to treatment and care services, that every person living with HIV receives treatment and that every person receiving treatment is retained in lifelong successful care and treatment.

The situation of HIV treatment in our region is deeply alarming. For this reason I launched early this year a regional initiative to “End the HIV Treatment Crisis”. I am certain that with strong ownership, political will and the right policies and strategies in place, countries can treat more and treat better.