



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

DR HUSSEIN A. GEZAIRY

REGIONAL DIRECTOR

WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

**INTERCOUNTRY MEETING OF NATIONAL COORDINATORS FOR
LABORATORY CONTAINMENT OF WILD POLIOVIRUSES AND
POTENTIALLY INFECTIOUS MATERIALS**

EMRO, Cairo, Egypt, 11–12 March 2001

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

I am very pleased to welcome you to Egypt and to this intercountry meeting of national coordinators for laboratory containment of wild polioviruses and potentially infectious materials.

I am confident you are all aware of the fact that the goal of eradicating poliomyelitis was set by the World Health Organization in 1988, and that remarkable progress has been made towards achieving that goal. Already the WHO Region of the Americas and Western Pacific Region have been certified as poliomyelitis free, and no

poliomyelitis cases have been reported in the WHO European Region since November 1998.

Considerable progress has been achieved in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region in polio eradication. After poliomyelitis being reported in all countries of the Region except Kuwait in 1988, at present polio cases are being reported from only four countries (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan and Somalia).

It is extremely encouraging that no indigenous wild poliovirus cases have been detected for 3 or more years in 13 of 23 countries of the Region. In addition, there is apparently no viral circulation in another six countries. This means that at present the poliovirus is being identified in only four countries.

Intensive efforts are currently under way to interrupt poliovirus transmission in the remaining endemic countries of this Region and in polio endemic countries in other parts of the world. Although there are special challenges to implementing activities in some countries affected by war or conflict, there is every reason to expect that poliomyelitis will soon be eradicated, and it is anticipated that the world will be certified as poliomyelitis free in the year 2005.

It is recognized internationally that the job of poliomyelitis eradication will not be complete as long as there is any risk of re-introduction of the virus from potential sources into communities, especially after cessation of immunization against poliomyelitis. Since there is neither a natural animal reservoir for the poliovirus nor long-term survival of the virus in the environment, it is very likely that laboratory materials will be the only remaining sources of the poliovirus once poliomyelitis has been eradicated from its human host. These laboratories may be storing specimens from known cases of poliomyelitis or storing other materials that are unknowingly infected with wild poliovirus.

History has taught us many important lessons. We should remember that smallpox is the only communicable disease that has been successfully eradicated from humans, and

that the last cases of smallpox occurred as a direct result of the inappropriate handling of materials that had been stored in a laboratory. We are also aware of worldwide concern regarding the potential threat to humanity posed by the limited stocks of infectious virus stored in a few laboratories in the world. The reason for the delay in destroying these remaining stocks of poxvirus was originally scientific interest in more studies on the virus of the eradicated disease. However, the concern is now political rather than scientific in nature, and it is not clear whether these stocks, through mishandling, may have reached the hands of those who might use it for terrorist actions. It is therefore most important that we try not to repeat the mistakes of the past. This is why laboratory containment of wild polioviruses is an important milestone in our efforts at poliomyelitis eradication.

The objective of this meeting is to come up with appropriate strategies to identify the laboratories in the Region that store materials that may be infected with polioviruses. The ultimate goal is to take appropriate actions to minimize or eliminate the risks that such materials pose, which is what is meant by the term “containment”.

Dear colleagues,

As national coordinators for laboratory containment of the wild polioviruses and potentially infectious materials, you will be playing a critical role in the poliomyelitis eradication programme. The task of surveying all biomedical laboratories within each country in the Region is enormous, yet it must be done before we will be able to certify the Region as poliomyelitis free.

I encourage you to be frank about the challenges that you anticipate in accomplishing your tasks, so that strategies can be developed that are appropriate to the local situation, and resources can be mobilized to support you in your efforts.

I wish you success in your deliberations and look forward to the outcome of this meeting.