In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Address by

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to the
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Dear Professor Fathallah, distinguished members of the Advisory Committee on Health Research, respected guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to the 24th Session of the Eastern Mediterranean Advisory Committee on Health Research. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the ACHR members who have completed their tenure and extend my greetings and welcome to the new members. I am sure that your two-day deliberations will further augment and strengthen the research for health agenda of the Regional Office and countries of the Region.

This ACHR session is of paramount importance to the Regional Office because it is taking place after the occurrence of two major global events related to health research, both of which have taken place in the last five months. First and most significant is the approval of the WHO Strategy on Research for Health by the Executive Board in January this year. Second is the convening of the Bamako Global Ministerial Forum on Research for Health, which was held in Mali in November 2008. Both of these events have not only provided a new impetus to research for health but have also specifically given a strong mandate to WHO to play a leading and visible role in the management, conduct and dissemination of research evidence.
This Region played an important role in the planning, processing, developing and finalization of the WHO Strategy on Research for Health and in the Bamako Call to Action on Research for Health. For this, not only has the role of the Regional Office Secretariat been recognized but also the contribution of Member States, both by WHO headquarters colleagues as well as the six organizing partners of the Bamako Ministerial Forum.

The WHO Strategy on Research for Health has clearly spelled out the role and contribution of WHO as an organization; and similarly, the Bamako Global Ministerial Forum has plainly stated the role of WHO in the management and implementation of the “Bamako Call to Action”. Although most of the highlights of the Bamako “Call to Action” are compatible with the “WHO strategy” and the “Global Strategy and Plan of Action on Public Health, Innovation and Intellectual Property”, there is a strong need for harmonization and alignment of all WHO strategies and polices for consolidated implementation of the recommendations addressing the research for health agenda in our Region. This is particularly significant and relevant to the health issues that disproportionately affect the poor, or otherwise marginalized populations, such as access to technology, access to information, access to health services, and fair distribution of resources.

Therefore, to gain from this global movement and goodwill, to further strengthen our resolve to make research evidence an integral component of decision-making in this Region, and realizing the diversity, as well as uniqueness of this Region, we have decided to develop our own regional research strategy. This is being discussed in detail under agenda item No 4.

I sincerely believe that while we are developing our own strategy, the Regional Office needs to work closely with WHO headquarters, other WHO Regions and relevant global partners to play its role in the implementation of the Bamako Call to Action on Research for Health and the WHO Strategy on Research for Health. An added and important benefit of such collaboration is to learn from experiences, share good practices and raise funds for multicountry collaborative research studies.

I would like to emphasize that the Member States in this Region are also very keen to use research evidence to improve the performance of their national health systems, which in many countries are overburdened and under-funded, and in some countries almost failing. In order to do so, it is extremely important to develop research partnerships across the Region
among different Member States, especially to share knowledge and mobilize research resources to strengthen national health research systems.

Over the next two days, you will hear in more detail the contribution and achievements of the Regional Office in health research; however, at this point I would like to highlight some policy initiatives taken during the last year.

The Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean in its 55th Session in 2008 endorsed its support for WHO’s role and responsibilities in health research in countries of the Region, and adopted a resolution on bridging the gap between health researchers and policy-makers. The main focus of this resolution (Resolution No. EM/RC55.R.7) is to assist Member States in the development of participatory, transparent and inclusive national strategies for health research; advocate for greater investment in health research; and to test effective interventions which improve the use of research evidence in decision-making.

In order to implement the recommendations in the Resolution, the Regional Office has already initiated activities to help in developing national health research strategies in selected countries of the Region. Furthermore, as recommended in the Resolution, the regional Evidence-Informed Policy Network for the Eastern Mediterranean, that is, EVIPNet, was launched in January 2009, during a joint meeting of Member State researchers and policy-makers in Lebanon.

We have also launched an initiative to work closely with the editors of medical journals in the Region to improve the quality of peer-reviewed publications, and to make these publications more relevant to the work and use of policy-makers.

Realizing that there is significant policy-relevant literature which is not available in the peer-reviewed domain, we are establishing an electronic repository for the Region to store such literature.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before I move forward, I would like to share with you some actions, which have been specifically taken to improve the research culture and output of the Regional Office. I am
pleased to inform you that now it is mandatory to obtain ethical approval from the Regional Research Ethics Committee for any research conducted or otherwise supported by the Regional Office.

We have also initiated a study to map and measure the research activities of the Regional Office to enhance the effectiveness and impact of the money spent and minimize any duplication and wastage of time and resources. This study will also help us to better align and coordinate research activities carried out by different units and divisions to strengthen the research capacities and capabilities of Member States.

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to an agenda item which has been included in the ACHR agenda for the first time. In addition to our Small Grants Scheme, we have identified three strategic areas of research for the next 3–5 years: “Research on climate change; research on food and nutrition; and, research on disasters”. For this purpose, we have invited five renowned experts from different parts of the world to provide us with the necessary evidence and potential research themes; however, we are very much looking forward to your input and advice in prioritization and finalization of the research agenda on these strategic topics.

I am confident that your deliberations on the critical issues tabled at this Session will be of great value, not only to the Regional Office, but also to the Member States. Your suggestions and recommendations are extremely important for the Regional Office in defining and reshaping the regional agenda on research for health.

I very much look forward to the results of your deliberations and I wish you a productive meeting and very pleasant stay in Cairo.

Thank you.