

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

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WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

to the

**FIRST INTERCOUNTRY MEETING OF DIRECTORS OF
THE REGIONAL POLIOVIRUS LABORATORY NETWORK**

VACSERA, Cairo, Egypt, 18-20 March, 1997

Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to this First Intercountry Meeting of Laboratory Directors of the Eastern Mediterranean Region Poliovirus Laboratory Network. I wish to extend my sincere thanks to VACSERA for hosting this meeting and for making excellent arrangements for this purpose.

This meeting reflects a strong spirit of international collaboration evidenced by the participation of 14 countries with scientists committed to the global eradication of poliomyelitis and by the input of many partners, particularly the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Rotary International, the Task Force for Child Survival and Development Agency, RIVM-Netherlands and WHO headquarters.

Dear Colleagues,

As you know, every country worldwide is committed to the global goal of poliomyelitis eradication by the year 2000. The current situation, both globally and in our Region, indicates that the progress towards the achievement of the global eradication goal is so far very satisfactory. The certification of the poliomyelitis eradication from the American continent was one of the most important health events during recent years.

The situation in our Region is also very encouraging. Reported poliomyelitis cases have shown a clear decreasing trend, although surveillance activities have been improved in all Member States. Only 348 polio cases have been reported so far for 1996—a 66% decrease from the 1015 cases reported in 1994 and a 56% decrease from the 789 cases reported in 1995. In addition, no cases were reported from 14 out of the 23 Member States.

Enhanced surveillance for suspected poliomyelitis cases cannot be complete without the virological investigation of samples from these cases. As a matter of fact virological surveillance for wild poliovirus transmission is a key component of the eradication strategy which can only be successful through good laboratory services. It is essential to investigate the possibility that the wild poliovirus is the etiologic agent in each suspected poliomyelitis case, and the generated virological analysis should provide information for action by the epidemiologists and other field staff of the eradication programme. This brings me to one of the most important recent developments supporting the eradication programme, namely the intratypic differentiation for the characterization of a poliovirus isolate as wild or vaccine type. Technology has provided us with two main systems, the ELISA immunoassay and the molecular method. The ELISA assay was implemented in our network some time ago and we now have two regional reference laboratories ready to implement the excellent molecular method. I sincerely hope that you discuss in your meeting the adequacy of these facilities in the network.

Dear Colleagues,

I am sure you will agree with me that any delay in laboratory reports of the identified polioviruses is a major concern for the eradication programme. As you may know, sometimes

key information sits in the laboratory for a long time before it reaches those who need it for immediate action. Most important, we think that this is basically a communication and collaboration problem between laboratories and epidemiologists, the two main partners of the AFP surveillance system, and I hope that you will provide helpful suggestions that will improve the situation. This problem unfortunately invalidates the slogan “Information for action” which is the main objective of surveillance! All of us realize that prompt reporting of results is a critical responsibility, particularly when it involves wild poliovirus strains and this is why we will be looking forward to your recommendations concerning this very sensitive aspect of the programme.

During this three-day meeting you will be reviewing the progress made by the poliovirus laboratory network in the context of the plan of action for global poliomyelitis eradication which has identified several objectives related to the establishment of a comprehensive laboratory support.

I wish you all success in your deliberations and I am confident that your wisdom will produce the best recommendations. I also wish you a pleasant and comfortable stay in Cairo.