

## Report

# AIDS Information Exchange Centre: six years of achievement

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## Introduction

The AIDS Information Exchange Centre (AIEC) was established in August 1990 as part of the WHO Eastern Mediterranean regional programme on acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) in order to meet the needs of the general public for accurate and up-to-date information about the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/AIDS epidemic. Two objectives were set for the Centre, namely:

1. to strengthen the exchange of information and experiences on AIDS, particularly in the field of health education, among Eastern Mediterranean countries, as well as with other World Health Organization central and regional offices;
2. to open fully the channels of communication on AIDS in Eastern Mediterranean countries, so as to inform and educate people more widely and thoroughly.

AIEC was established as a region-wide service with the purpose of *exchanging* information on HIV/AIDS. Hence, this function became part of the centre's name.

Another principle of the Centre was that it should be culture sensitive and give due consideration to the cultural norms and social traditions prevailing in the Eastern Mediterranean countries.

## Activities

Since the AIEC was established in August 1990, it has undertaken the following activities:

- Information and education materials on AIDS/sexually transmitted diseases (STD) have been exchanged between the Centre and the national AIDS programmes, as well as between other sources of such information and materials within and outside the Region.
- AIEC has increased its holdings of journals, documents, publications and audiovisual materials originating both from WHO and non-WHO sources. These materials have been used as appropriate in support of national AIDS programmes.
- AIEC has continued to generate, translate, adapt and/or reprint documents and publications on AIDS/STD. By the end of 1996, a total of 76 titles had been produced and distributed widely in the Region, while five other titles were in production
- AIEC has collaborated with several national AIDS programmes in designing their information and educational materials, checking the information therein and arranging for their production as and when required.

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- AIEC's network of contact points continued to grow. At the end of 1996, there were more than 4000 national, regional and global addresses on the mailing list. The mailing list for AIDS/STD materials included:
  - the health sector
  - the education sector
  - the information sector
  - the nursing sector
  - United Nations offices
  - nongovernmental organizations, and
  - corresponding individuals.
- AIEC assumed the role of focal point for World AIDS Day. In this capacity, it played an active role in stimulating and coordinating World AIDS Day programmes in the Region.
- AIEC continued to provide background documentation and information materials as and when required for national and regional events on AIDS/STD such as meetings, workshops, lectures, graduate and postgraduate studies, etc.
- AIEC provided information to countries organizing national AIDS programmes about publications and audiovisual products on HIV/AIDS/STD available on the international market. It also helped obtain the necessary material for such programmes.
- AIEC compiled around 500 terms on HIV/AIDS/STD in Arabic and English. This standard terminology is to be incorporated in the forthcoming edition of the *Unified medical dictionary* which is being prepared by the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean.
- AIEC undertook the translation, adaptation and publication of the Arabic version of the *Global AIDS News*, from its preliminary issue until it ceased publica-

Table 1 Materials distributed by AIEC

Year	Printed items	Audiovisual
1990	106 061	141
1991	549 997	129
1992	821 841	132
1993	1 091 853	189
1994	734 210	951
1995	1 463 154	312
1996	1 116 777	514

tion at the end of 1995. This periodical was used as a vehicle for information received from headquarters, as well as for news from the Region.

- AIEC responded to individual requests for information received from within and outside the Region (Table 1). The requests were mostly from lay people, but also included professionals, and governmental and nongovernmental bodies.

## Achievements

AIEC has issued a series of messages on AIDS for medical practitioners, dentists, nurses, staff of laboratories and blood banks, staff of operating theatres and obstetric rooms and youth and young people. It has addressed the general public through leaflets entitled *Dear citizen*. These pamphlets were introduced as prototypes to all governments of the Region to be adopted or adapted as deemed appropriate. They were very well received because of their simple presentation, style and illustrations. They were issued by AIEC in Arabic, English and French, but were translated by the countries into virtually all languages

which are widely used in the Region. Hundreds of thousands of copies have been printed and used by the general public and professionals in all countries of the Eastern Mediterranean and also countries outside the Region.

A concise booklet entitled *Epidemiology of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS)* was written by Dr M.H. Wahdan, WHO Assistant Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean and published by AIEC [1]. This booklet contains basic information about the epidemiological situation of HIV/AIDS both globally and within the Region. Reference was made to important aspects, such as the etiology, diagnosis, modes of transmission, patterns of infection, prevention, control measures and the cycle of replication of HIV. The booklet was produced in Arabic and English. It has been periodically revised and updated and seven editions have been published. This basic document was used as a source of up-to-date information on HIV/AIDS in most meetings, conferences and workshops held in the Region. It has also been used to meet the requests received from professional individuals and bodies for accurate scientific information on the issues.

AIEC was instrumental in organizing a regional consultation on the role of religion and ethics in the prevention and control of AIDS in September 1991. The meeting brought together a group of high-level Muslim and Christian religious leaders from the Region. The outcome was a booklet summarizing the discussions and outlining 12 recommendations on various sensitive issues related to HIV/AIDS such as human rights, sex education, use of condoms and marriage [2]. This publication was produced in Arabic and English, but was translated by countries into other national languages. It was widely distributed among Muslim and Christian authorities and indi-

viduals around the world. It has been reprinted several times and requests for copies continue to be received from within and outside the Region.

The Arabic version of the *Global AIDS News* was one of the successful activities of AIEC. While AIEC acted as focal point for the journal's producers at headquarters, the Arabic version was adapted into a regional instrument for exchanging information. The adapted Arabic version was oriented to the Region and was sensitive to the cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean countries.

Several means of exchanging information and experiences in the context of AIDS/STD were used successfully such as:

- calendars featuring posters produced by national AIDS programmes;
- collective video tapes, including selected television spots and extracts from national television programmes;
- distribution of packages of information materials produced by different countries of the Region to all national AIDS programmes.

## Conclusions

The establishment of AIEC as part of the regional programme on AIDS proved to be effective in filling gaps in accurate information, particularly in the fields of health education and AIDS health promotion, mainly among the general public, but also among professionals. Its services have been requested and appreciated both within the Region and beyond. This was expressed on several occasions, such as at the annual meetings of National AIDS Programme Managers, as well as at the Forty-first Session of the Regional Committee.



In order to maintain the services of AIEC as a specialized element within a wider context, it was integrated with the Regional Health Literature and Library Services in January 1997.

### References

1. Wahdan MH. *Epidemiology of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS)*. 7th ed. Alexandria, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, 1997.
2. *The role of religion and ethics in the prevention and control of AIDS*. Alexandria, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, 1992 (document WHO-EM/AIDS/36).

AIDS INFORMATION EXCHANGE CENTRE



**A MESSAGE ON AIDS FOR THE FAMILY**

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION  
Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

مركز تبادل المعلومات  
حول الإيدز

**رسالة عن الإيدز  
إلى الأسرة**

منظمة الصحة العالمية  
المكتب الإقليمي لشرق المتوسط

*Information and education materials are an essential tool in the prevention of HIV/AIDS*

EMRO publications are available from Distribution and Sales, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, PO Box 1517, Alexandria 21511, Egypt.