



19 December 2019 - Directors of national influenza laboratories (NICs) in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region met for two days to discuss issues and solutions for challenges in laboratory surveillance for seasonal, avian and other pandemic influenza viruses. The meeting, held in Casablanca, Morocco, on 16–17 November 2019, also included representatives of WHO Collaborating Centres and other experts from the Region.

Participants from the Region's 22 countries also reviewed the current functioning of NICs and the support needed to strengthen technical capacities related to influenza surveillance, collaboration and information. The meeting served as a forum for identifying current needs and creative solutions and sharing best practices to strengthen and maintain laboratory capacities for the detection of influenza viruses.

NICs are national institutions designated by ministries of health and recognized by WHO upon meeting the required terms of reference. Within each country, an NIC collects specimens or virus isolates from subnational laboratories and conducts preliminary analysis. Representative virus isolates are then selected and shipped to the WHO Collaborating Centres for advanced antigenic and genetic analysis. Based on the results, WHO makes an annual recommendation on influenza vaccine composition. NICs also alert WHO of any unusual outbreaks of influenza or influenza-like illness, or the detection of non-subtypable or low-reacting virus isolates using WHO diagnostic reagents provided through the Global Influenza Surveillance Network (GISN) as required by the International Health Regulations 2005.

The meeting provided an opportunity for influenza laboratories in the Eastern Mediterranean Region to strengthen their working relations with WHO and the members of GISN, particularly the WHO Collaborating Centres, and allowed the development of a consensus-based operational approach towards the support that can be provided by WHO to strengthen influenza laboratories in the Region.

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