



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message by

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In the past few years, efforts and resources invested in expanding the health sector response to the HIV epidemic in the Region have resulted in noticeable achievements in terms of increased access to HIV prevention and care services. All countries have made efforts to increase access to life-saving antiretroviral therapy. Between 2008 and 2010, the number of people living with HIV (PLHIV) on ART increased by 55%, and several countries doubled the number of PLHIV receiving ART. However, since, in our Region, most people living with HIV do not know that they are HIV infected, or are not known to the health system, regional treatment coverage is still the lowest globally.

Stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and those at increased risk of HIV transmission still exist to varying degrees across the Region and remain massive barriers to people accessing prevention and care services. Of particular concern are stigma and discrimination in health care settings and by health care workers. Reportedly, these are major impediments when it comes to encouraging stigmatized population groups to seek and access health services and adhere to health interventions.

The health care community has witnessed women in labour not being allowed to deliver in hospitals because of their HIV positive status. Men, women and children living with HIV in dire need of surgery have been denied this right. Even with non-invasive procedures, health care workers have refused to care for people living with HIV. Public and institutional measures have enacted mandatory HIV testing on individuals upon their admission to health care services, often resulting in denial of access, unnecessary isolation or, at the least, gossip.

The right to health is fundamental. For this reason, the regional theme for the World AIDS Campaign 2011 is stigma and discrimination in health care settings, asking us all to reflect on human rights in the context of universal access to HIV prevention, treatment and care.

The right to the highest attainable level of health for every human being is a core value in WHO's Constitution. We should not, as people in charge of the health of our populations, tolerate the denial of health care to people who need it, whether on the basis of an HIV positive status or on the basis of our moral judgment of their behaviour. We must redouble our efforts to challenge and change policies that breach the right of individuals living with or at risk of HIV to quality health care. People should not be tested for HIV without their consent. And positive HIV status should not negatively affect the ability of individuals to access health services. A human rights-based approach is the only way to achieve universal access to HIV prevention, treatment and care.