

21 October 2014, Tunis – A panel discussion on the prevention of noncommunicable diseases has been held during the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean. During the panel, Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, announced a new WHO initiative to address the unopposed marketing of tobacco and unhealthy products to the public, working in close coordination with ministers of health and a range of partners.

The panel was moderated by renowned television anchor Mrs Laila Al-Shaikhli. Besides Dr Alwan, other panelists included H.E Dr Ahmad Al-Saidi, Minister of Health of Oman, H.E. Professor Mohamed El Saleh Ben Ammar, Minister of Public Health of Tunisia, Professor Majid Ezzati, from the School of Public Health at Imperial College, London, Professor Philip James, immediate Past President of the World Obesity Federation, and Dr Ties Boerma, Director of the Department of Health Statistics and Informatics at WHO headquarters in Geneva.

The discussion highlighted a range of issues, from the need to identify the rising burden of noncommunicable diseases, and specifically deaths, to the increasing prevalence of the main shared risk factors for noncommunicable diseases, which create further challenges for the future.

The panelists and audience agreed that the WHO strategy for addressing noncommunicable diseases, which focuses on the three pillars of prevention, surveillance and health care, continues to be relevant and constitutes the main approach for addressing noncommunicable diseases.

While WHO has provided a roadmap and tools for implementation, the key challenge remains the inadequate implementation of proven measures for noncommunicable diseases prevention, particularly interventions which are cost-effective, affordable and feasible to implement in all health systems. In some countries, there have even been reversals of prior gains in the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases.

Several factors explain this situation. These include inadequate platforms for multisectoral action on noncommunicable diseases, as much of noncommunicable diseases prevention requires interventions by sectors other than health, as well as limited capacities within ministries of health, and the influence of vested interests including those linked to the tobacco and unhealthy food industries.

Panelists agreed on the need to raise the priority given to noncommunicable diseases prevention. Innovative approaches are needed that require the engagement of a wide range of actors and partners. An example was given from the floor by the famous Iraqi composer and master oud player, Mr Naseer Shamma, who saw the opportunity to engage his colleagues in the cultural field to promote healthy lifestyles and prevent noncommunicable diseases through their work.

At the end of the panel discussion, Dr Alwan presented Mrs Al-Shaikhli with an engraved plate in appreciation of her dedication and contributions to health.

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