

15 September 2020 □ Today, the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean Region is extremely worrying, with more people being infected every day. In some countries, including Iraq, Morocco, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates, the significant increase in the number of cases is especially concerning, and highlights an urgent need for more rigorous action.

While an upsurge of cases was expected due to countries easing restrictions after months of lockdowns and with increased population mobility, governments cannot continue to respond as they have been doing since the start of the pandemic.

It is no longer enough to only test people coming to hospitals and clinics who are already displaying symptoms. The more people who are tested, the more cases appropriately identified, isolated, and the more contacts who are traced, the more effective the efforts at containing transmission will be.

Individuals and communities must remain vigilant. We must find ways to address the resurgence of COVID-19 cases and limit the spread of infection. Millions of people are still at risk. Social measures such as mask use, physical distancing, and proper hygiene measures must be strictly followed. I cannot stress this enough.

Beyond COVID-19 and these latest worrying developments, there remains another area of concern.

As the pandemic has progressed over the past few months, health services became limited as more health workers and health facilities responded to COVID-19. As a result, essential health services, such as immunization, treatment for chronic diseases, reproductive health, dental health services, and many others, became less of a priority.

This was made worse by the lockdowns imposed early on during the pandemic in many countries, leading to major movement restrictions, fear of being exposed to COVID-19 infection in health care facilities, stigma, and many rumours.

Many health care workers were also concerned about not being adequately protected from COVID-19 due to inadequate availability of personal protective equipment and limited other measures, which led to health care facilities being poorly staffed.

In addition, as countries closed many points of entry, delivery of essential medicines, equipment and vaccines was disrupted, leading to major shortages in countries.

Overall, disruption of essential health services in our Region since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic has been among the highest in all WHO regions.

In a recent survey by WHO, essential health services have been partially or completely disrupted in almost half of the countries in our Region. These services include hypertension treatment and urgent dental care, palliative care services, asthma services and rehabilitation services, and diabetes and cancer management. Services for cardiovascular emergencies in more than a quarter of all countries have been partially or completely disrupted.

As the pandemic evolves, its impact on essential health services is likely to become more severe.

Early in the pandemic, and as the impact on essential health services became evident, WHO strongly advised countries to ensure continuity of these services using innovative approaches.

Today, I again urge all countries to make determined efforts to ensure that essential health services continue to be provided, while responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the Regional Office, we have established dedicated capacity within our COVID-19 regional response team to ensure support to countries in maintaining essential health services as they continue to battle COVID-19.

For WHO, for governments, and for communities, our goal is to ensure health for all people, by

all people, and against all diseases. We must not let our diverted efforts for COVID-19 make us lose other gains, leaving those in need of essential health services struggling to survive, with limited access to treatment or medical care. Beyond COVID-19, and to ensure that the health and well-being of all people are protected, much more needs to be done by all.

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