

The World Health Organization has warned that the coverage rate of antiretroviral therapy in the Eastern Mediterranean Region is the lowest among the six WHO regions. Only 5% of people who need this therapy are receiving it, despite the fact that the therapy is now available and has been recognized to dramatically improve survival of HIV-infected individuals.

In the context of the global AIDS campaign 2006 and on the occasion of World AIDS Day, observed annually on 1 December, a media kit will be issued by the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean. This kit shows that the HIV epidemic is building in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, with the estimated number of people living with HIV approaching 620 000, 100 000 of whom were infected in 2005 alone.

An estimated 75 000 people in the Eastern Mediterranean Region need antiretroviral therapy; however, only 4000 are receiving it. In December 2005, 1.3 million people in developing countries around the world were receiving antiretroviral therapy, compared with only 400 000 in December 2003. This improvement is attributed to the impact of the 3×5 Initiative, a global collaborative effort initiated by WHO and its partners in 2003 in recognition of the success of antiretroviral therapy.

The target of 3×5 Initiative was to treat with antiretroviral therapy 3 million people, or 50% of those needing treatment, by the end of 2005. Although only 20% of those in need were reached, the initiative created enormous momentum for scaling up prevention and treatment. Drawing on this momentum, a new global initiative is now being undertaken: the Universal

Access Initiative. In line with this new initiative, the slogan “towards HIV prevention, treatment and care for all” was chosen by WHO as the regional slogan for the global AIDS campaign 2006. Five strategic priorities were set for achieving universal access to prevention, treatment and care in the health sector: expanding access to HIV testing and counselling, delivering preventive services in health care settings, improving prevention and management of opportunistic infections, tackling weaknesses in health services that were brought to light by the 3×5 Initiative and improving the availability and quality of information on the HIV epidemic in all countries.

As of mid 2006, 25 years have passed since the first cases of AIDS were reported. During that period, over 65 million people were infected with HIV, and 25 million died. In 2005, around 47 000 people died of AIDS in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and 2.8 million died worldwide.

The majority of HIV infections in the Region are due to heterosexual transmission. Injecting drug use is becoming an important mode of transmission, and almost all countries in the Region have reported HIV transmission among injecting drug users.

Nevertheless, the chances for controlling the epidemic are better now. In 2005, the leaders of the G8 group of industrialized countries made a commitment to “working with WHO, UNAIDS and other international bodies to develop a package of HIV prevention, treatment and care, with the aim of as close as possible universal access to treatment for those who need it by 2010”.

Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, believes the coming period will witness bring success in expanding antiretroviral coverage in the Region, as well as in delivery of prevention and care services for people living with HIV. This success will lead to more successes. But we have to remember that success is never achieved without continuous work, extensive efforts, strong partnership and proper planning.

The Regional Office has developed a regional strategic plan for strengthening health sector response to HIV/AIDS in 2006–2010. By implementing this strategy, national HIV/AIDS programme managers will work to strengthen and expand prevention, treatment and care towards achieving the goal of universal access.

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