

Blinding trachoma is one of the oldest infectious diseases, and is the first preventable cause of blindness in the world. It affects the poorest of the poor around the world. It is a neglected disease of neglected populations. Today it is estimated that there are around 60 million people in the infectious stage of the disease, mostly children under 10 years old, and some 6 million, mainly women, in the blinding stage of the disease, at risk of immediate irreversible visual loss. The disease is endemic in the poorest communities in 55 countries around the world. Africa is the most affected continent, and the disease perpetuates the vicious circle of poverty, causing blindness and taking away precious resources from the poorest countries in the world.

The WHO Alliance for the Global Elimination of Blinding Trachoma by the year 2020 (GET 2020) will hold its annual meeting in the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean in Cairo from 2–4 April 2007. The aim of the meeting is to review the progress towards elimination of blinding trachoma and exchange information and experience on prevention or control and to advocate for additional support from all the Alliance's partners—endemic countries, governmental and nongovernmental organizations, foundations, research institutions, donors, as well as the private sector. HE Mrs Suzanne Mubarak, First Lady of Egypt, HRH Prince Abdulaziz bin Ahmed Al Saud, Chairman of the Board of IMPACT-EMR, Dr Luis Gomes Sambo, the WHO Regional Director for Africa, the Ministers of Health of Egypt, Morocco and Sudan, as well as the Ministers of Housing, Environment, International Cooperation and the Mass Media of Egypt are invited to this meeting.

This 11th meeting marks the celebration of 10 years of the GET2020 Alliance, and is also expected to provide an opportunity to bring a regional focus to the work of the Alliance, in particular in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Progress towards the elimination of blinding trachoma has been successfully achieved by many Member States of the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region through a combination of major public health efforts, using the WHO-recommended SAFE strategy, as well as overall socioeconomic developments.

The SAFE strategy endorsed by WHO has proved its effectiveness to eliminate blinding trachoma. The strategy comprises Surgery for preventing imminent blindness; Antibiotics (tetracycline ointment or oral azithromycin) to cure the infection; Facial cleanliness, mainly in children to stop transmission of the disease to siblings or caregivers; and Environmental improvement to promote healthy environments, use of latrines, and provision and use of water for personal hygiene.

The meeting will be attended by the Alliance partners, representatives of Member States, international experts working in trachoma elimination, International Agency for Prevention of Blindness/EMR, IMPACT/EMR, UNICEF, AGFUND, Islamic Development Bank (IDB), The Carter Center, the International Trachoma Initiative (ITI), Christoffel-Blindenmission (CBM), Sightsavers International, World Vision, Al Noor Foundation, Light for the World, Organisation pour la Prévention de la Cecité, Helen Keller International and other nongovernmental organizations and WHO collaborating centres.

The participants will address the many challenges facing trachoma control activities. The main challenge today is that the financial resources available for implementing the strategy are largely inadequate, at national and international levels. Even worse, when funds are available they tend to cover only part of the strategy, therefore reducing its overall effectiveness and long-term beneficial effects.

Trachoma is a neglected disease that handicaps children and women, in the poorest communities in developing countries, and in vulnerable populations in countries in economic transition. “Elimination of blinding trachoma has to be addressed within the framework of eliminating the root causes of poverty itself, and of working together, by linking the elimination process to the development process at national and regional levels. In many endemic countries trachoma is not perceived as a priority, but by alleviating poverty and linking trachoma to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and community-based initiatives (CBI) we can advance the process of elimination”, said Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean.

It worth mentioning that trachoma is being eliminated from many endemic countries, and over 40 countries worldwide are implementing the SAFE strategy at various levels. Good progress

towards the elimination of blinding trachoma has been achieved by many Member States, including the Islamic Republic of Iran, Morocco and Oman from the Eastern Mediterranean Region and Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Niger, Senegal and Tanzania from the African Region

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