The first Vaccination Week in the Eastern Mediterranean starts on Saturday, 24 April 2010 with 22 countries mobilizing to revive commitment towards immunization through advocacy, education and communication. With the slogan “Vaccination…an obvious choice” the objectives of Vaccination Week are to improve communication and dissemination of information on the value of immunization, increase community demand for immunization and use a combination of innovative approaches and solutions to improve access to immunization for people in the Region.

As part of the Vaccination Week commemoration, a regional launching ceremony will take place this Saturday in Beirut, Lebanon, under the patronage of Her Excellency Mrs Wafaa Michel Sleiman, the First Lady of Lebanon. Together with Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, they will address senior figures from ministries, international and local organizations, as well as members of the diplomatic corps and mass media.

"Immunization is a family and community responsibility", said H.E. Mrs Wafaa Michel Sleiman. "Vaccines have the power not only to save, but to transform lives, giving children a chance to grow up healthy, go to school and improve their life prospects".

A variety of activities which focus on vaccination as an investment for a better life, as a family and community responsibility and as crucial in providing protection against diseases will be carried out during the week, including workshops, training sessions, social mobilization, round table discussions and exhibitions addressing a wide range of vaccine-related issues. In addition, vaccination services such as the tracking of unvaccinated people, implementing large-scale vaccination campaigns and using Child Health Days to deliver an integrated package of life-saving health interventions will also take place.

"Decades of experience tell us that investment in immunization pays off in terms of lives saved and illness prevented," said Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, "and with every country in the Region joining Vaccination Week, we can increase awareness of the benefits of life-saving vaccines to protect the health of people in our Region".

This year, for the first time, well over 100 countries in the WHO regions of the Americas, Eastern Mediterranean and Europe are participating in simultaneous vaccination weeks. This unprecedented collaborative effort between the three regions builds public understanding of the benefits of immunization and appreciation of its value.

Immunization is one of the most successful and effective health interventions and has reduced morbidity and mortality across the world in a safe and cost-effective manner. From infants to senior citizens, immunization prevents debilitating illness and disability and death from vaccine-preventable diseases. Moreover, the benefits of immunization are increasingly being extended to adolescents and adults, providing protection against life-threatening diseases, such as influenza, meningitis and cancers that occur in adulthood.

The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean provides technical support to participating countries, including development planning and advocacy tools to assist national health authorities to organize and implement relevant health promotion activities according to national health goals and current epidemiologic evidence. Regional and national partners, including UNICEF provide support in the implementation of the initiative. In addition, presidents

and prime ministers, first ladies, health ministers and ambassadors are lending their voices to this important initiative.

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