10 April 2017 – The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, in collaboration with the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO) and the Oman National Bioethics Committee, Sultan Qaboos University, organized the first Regional Bioethics Summit for the Eastern Mediterranean/Arab States in Muscat, Oman, from 5 to 6 April 2017.

The Summit was convened in response to the recommendation of the last Global Summit of National Ethics/Bioethics Committees, which was held from 16 to 18 March 2016 in Berlin, Germany. Held every 2 years, the Global Summit brings together national ethics committees, i.e. bodies with recognized national roles in providing bioethics advice or decisions, e.g. ethics/bioethics committees/commissions/advisory bodies, from around the world to share their thoughts and experience in relation to bioethics issues. WHO serves as the Permanent Secretariat of the Global Summit, while UNESCO is a permanent member of the Steering Committee.

The main goal of the first regional Summit was to:

- foster development of national ethics/bioethics committees in the Region; and
- establish effective mechanisms of regional harmonization and cooperation to address emerging issues related to bioethics.

The objectives of the regional summit were to:

- discuss best methods of regional collaboration, with special focus on development and work of national ethics/bioethics committees;
- develop strategies to raise public awareness on bioethics in Member States, in line with

findings and recommendations of related surveys held by both WHO Regional Office and UNESCO in the Region;

- develop strategies to strengthen linkages between the bioethics committees and policy-makers;
- share experiences and deliberate on relevant bioethics issues such as: ethics during disasters and emergencies; controversial ethical issues emerging from new situations brought about by advances in biology and medicine.

The meeting was inaugurated by HE Dr Ali Al-Bemani, Vice-Chancellor, Sultan Qaboos University and Chairman, Oman National Bioethics Committee as well as WHO Regional Office and UNESCO/Arab States' representatives.

Rapporteurs included: Dr Aasim Ahmed (Pakistan); Dr Mohamed El-Sheikh (Sudan) and Dr Ahmed Shukaily (Oman).

The participants included NBC/NEC representatives from Bahrain, Egypt, Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen; distinguished speakers from Canada and Senegal; in addition to WHO (Geneva, Cairo) and UNESCO (Paris, Beirut) headquarters and regional offices, respectively.

The discussion covered many subjects related to bioethics globally and regionally, including:

- Berlin Global Summit (2016)
- upcoming Dakar Global Summit (2018)
- WHO Regional Bioethics Survey: outcomes and recommendations
- WHO's guidance for managing ethical issues in infectious disease outbreaks
- WHO's training manual on ethics in epidemics, emergencies and disasters (research, surveillance and patient care)
- UNESCO's activities with National Bioethics Committees
- UNESCO's Regional Legal Survey: outcomes and recommendations;
- generating evidence in humanitarian emergencies: ethics of research and research ethics oversight;
- creating an ethical infrastructure for humanitarian organizations, and International Bioethics Committee (IBC) report on bioethical response to the situation of refugees.

NBC case-studies (from Jordan, Oman, Pakistan) as well as specific case studies related to: non-discrimination/genetics (Bahrain), MOH guideline for conduct of clinical studies and trials (Oman), terminal care (Lebanon), academic collaboration with national advisory bodies to raise awareness on bioethics (Sudan) and integration of bioethics in health sciences' curricula (IR of Iran) were presented and discussed.

The participants in the regional bioethics summit agreed on a list of recommendations including: allocating sufficient resources for bioethics; establishing/enhancing work and roles of National Ethics / Bioethics Committees in the Region in coordination with UNESCO/WHO; enhancing mult-sectoral involvement within NEC/NBC work, including the role of media / civil society as key stakeholders to ensure compliance of concerned bodies; strengthening national/regional coordination between NEC/NBCs, as well as among different bodies dealing with misconduct or claims; applying research ethics and monitoring ongoing research; developing/enforcing bylaws/regulations for important society ethical issues (e.g. premarital genetic testing, organ donation/trafficking, end-of-life care, assisted reproductive technologies); promoting consistency between regulations and practices within different institutions dealing with bioethics and research; raising public awareness, especially among patients, on bioethics related matters; fostering bioethics principles within the health sciences' curricula of academic institutions and in-service training of healthcare providers (using regional/international expertise) and national capacity building of healthcare providers on medical/research ethics, priority setting, impact assessment, ethics and research during humanitarian emergencies and outbreaks (using available CIOMS, UNESCO, WHO guidelines, etc.). Representatives of four countries volunteered to follow up on prioritization and implementation of such recommendations in the near future, in coordination with WHO and UNESCO.

Related report

Summary report on the Eastern Mediterranean/Arab States regional summit of national ethics and bioethics committees Muscat, Oman, 5–6 April 2017

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