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Background

The WHO Global Arabic Programme (GAP) has been hosted by the Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office since the 1980s. It aimed to: disseminate the work of WHO through Arabic publications and other information products; provide reliable and updated health and biomedical information and research outcomes in Arabic for medical and health professionals; develop a medical and health-related terminology database in Arabic.

In view of limited resources, the programme has in recent years concentrated on translating WHO's most important publications and information products, in line with the Organization's strategic objectives and in response to Member State's needs. There was a need therefore to reconsider WHO's role in the area of publishing health information in Arabic.

In that regard, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, in collaboration with Arab Center for Authorship and Translation of Health Science (ACMLS), held a consultation meeting on the Arabic Programme on 10 January 2016, Cairo, Egypt. The consultation aimed to: review the current objectives and situation of the programme, including challenges and lessons learnt in the past three decades; determine the role of WHO in providing health information in Arabic, translation of medical and health sciences, and collaboration with partners to promote provision of and access to health information in Arabic; discuss the role of WHO and other institutions and partners to promote publishing and teaching of health sciences in Arabic; and make recommendations on the way forward.

The consultation was attended by professors from medical schools, international and regional representatives of medical and health science institutions, and consultants (institutions interested in translation and authorship of health sciences, Arabic academies, translation institutes, and senior officials of languages/publishing at WHO).

Discussions and challenges

Discussions focused on the role of WHO in general and the Regional Office in particular in providing Arabic health information to Member States and Arabic speakers, whether it be WHO or non-WHO publications or information products. The Arabic Programme no longer has the

required resources to realize all the objectives for which it was established. Therefore, GAP needs to focus on translating the most important publications and information products of WHO in line with the Organization's strategic objectives and in collaboration with WHO headquarters.

While health and medical information is updated every day, translation into Arabic falls short of keeping pace with such continuous change. To overcome this problem, needs and priorities in the area of health information should be identified and a regional fund in support of scientific translation established. In addition, the arabization of health sciences requires institutionalization of partnerships in this field with specialized institutions such as ACMLS which has been active in arabization field since the 1980s. Other options may include partnerships with medical schools and translation institutes.

The Unified Medical Dictionary is recognized as an important resource providing unified medical terms in Arabic and English and other languages. It should be further developed and updated. Practical approaches are needed in revising the dictionary. Comments received on the dictionary should be considered and more feedback on the acceptability of its terms should be sought from users of the dictionary. There is a need to develop a comprehensive plan to review and update the Unified Medical Dictionary and to make it available in a new user-friendly electronic platform.

The issue of medical learning should be dealt with in light of resolution "EM/RC62/R.4 Medical education: a framework for action", which was endorsed by the 62nd Regional Committee. In that regard, a high-level meeting between ministers of health and higher education was needed to achieve the highest level of coordination and cooperation necessary for the effective implementation of the regional framework for medical education.

Recommendations

To WHO

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1. Support GAP to deliver its activities and focus its resources on translating WHO key publications, in collaboration with WHO headquarters, and develop a strategic plan for Arabic translation based on the needs of Member States and WHO priorities with due consideration of any current criteria for translating WHO publications into its official languages.
2. Conduct a comprehensive study on the Region's needs in health information, especially in the area of health outreach, and identify priority areas in translating publications into Arabic in light of the study's findings.

3. Further support and develop the Unified Medical Dictionary through establishing an expert committee to review it, define the content to be updated and create a comprehensive plan for its development and enhanced use.

4. GAP should support arabization efforts and pursue dialogue with bodies participating in the consultation meeting and other entities interested in translation and arabization.

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