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WHO event addressing public health priorities

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1 Summary report on the Regional consultation on the draft WHO global report on disability inclusion in the health sector https://applications.emro.who.int/docs/WHOEMHLP133E-eng.pdf

Introduction

Adopted during the 77th World Health Assembly in May 2021, Resolution WHA74.8 mandates WHO to promote disability inclusion in the health sector (1). The resolution specifically requests WHO to develop a global report on the highest attainable standard of health for persons with disability, in line with the global and regional commitments to achieve health equity and build back fairer (2-4) Resolution WHA74.8 recommends that Member States integrate the health priorities of persons with disability into their health systems, focusing on 4 key areas: strengthening health systems to ensure access to effective healthcare services, improving access to crosssectoral public health interventions, enhancing protection during health

emergencies, and improving collection and disaggregation of reliable data on disability.

The last world report highlighting the situation of persons with disability and the challenges they face was developed in 2011 by WHO and World Bank (5), hence the need to develop a new global report on disability, which takes into consideration emerging issues globally. To contribute to the global report and establish a foundation for advancing disability-inclusive health systems in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, WHO/EMRO facilitated an assessment of the disability-inclusiveness of the COVID-19 health response in 18 countries of the Region.

The report of the assessment was then presented to Member States for review and discussion during a virtual meeting held in March 2021.

Summary of discussions

Disability inclusion in the health sector is critical; it will offer significant economic returns and help cater forthe health needs of over 1 billion people currently with disabilities globally (6). The global disability report will provide clear and practical guidelines to policymakers and healthcare providers on how to strengthen disability inclusion in the health sector. However, to be effective, the report must align with the international legal frameworks, laws and policies such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (7) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (8); existing approaches such as community-based rehabilitation; and approaches for care in fragile and conflict-affected States. Participants said the global report would be very useful in advancing disability inclusion in the health sectorBarriers to accessing healthcare by persons with disability In accessing healthcare, persons with disability experience such barriers as poor communication, negative health worker attitudes, lack of disabilityfriendly building designs, and high cost of healthcare services. Barriers due to the COVID-19 pandemic include policies or strategies that increased health risks for persons with disabilities, such as the physical distancing mandate which had no considerations for their support and accommodation needs. There is a general lack of disability-related laws and policies and a lack of reliable data on Universal Health Coverage, cross-sectoral public health interventions and health emergencies in the region, making it difficult to provide inclusive services (9).

Although some countries have invested in infrastructure and planning to facilitate access to healthcare by persons with disability during the pandemic, the COVID-19 vaccination has generally not been disability-inclusive, leading to lower vaccination rates among persons with disability.

Other barriers include the limited awareness about the potential use of digital technology to increase access to healthcare for persons with disability, limited capacity of civil society organizations to engage in health sector planning on behalf of persons with disability, lack of public policy and laws to protect persons with disability from discrimination by service providers, and limited funding for local stakeholders to conduct research on healthcare service provision for persons with disability.

Improving disability inclusion in the health sector

A framework on disability inclusion in the health sector

through primary healthcare, which was presented

in the meeting, highlighted 3 strategies to guide

governments and health sector partners on how to

improve people-centred health systems. These are:

focus on integrated health services and public health

interventions; empowered individuals and communities;

and multisectoral policy and action. Cooperation and

coordination between disability stakeholders, including

the private sector, and engagement of persons with

disabilities and their representatives in healthcare planning, would enhance access to services by persons

with disabilities. There is a need to integrate digital

health into healthcare planning for persons with

disability in a cost-effective manner, as well as to develop

and enforce policies and laws to protect them from

stigma and discrimination. More resources are needed

to boost the capacity of the healthcare workforce and

organizations of persons with disability so they can act

as effective counterparts and implementers, and for the

accommodation and support needed to enable persons

with disabilities to access services.

Recommendations

Member States that require support for the dissemination,

communication and implementation of the global report

were requested to contact WHO/EMRO for discussions.

WHO and other partners are to ensure that the

provisions in the Convention on the Rights of Persons

with Disabilities are incorporated into the framework

and that the framework addresses important areas such

as rehabilitation and assistive technology. They are also

to seek feedback on the report from the broader civil

society, partners and independent experts.

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