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WHO event addressing public health priorities

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*Summary report on the technical working group consultation on strengthening health laboratory services in the Eastern Mediterranean. https://applications.emro.who.int/docs/WHOEMLAB396E-eng.pdf?ua=1.

Introduction

Response to the COVID-19 pandemic has led to the rapid growth of molecular diagnoses and genomic sequencing globally (1,2). During the pandemic, new possibilities were introduced in the use of genetic sequencing for surveillance. Building on this momentum, it is critical to increase attention to improvements in health laboratory systems and the quality of services provided. To do this, WHO Member States in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) needed to develop a new framework for laboratory strengthening, considering lessons learned since 2016 when the regional strategic framework for strengthening health laboratory services 2016–2020 (3) (extended until 2023) was developed and endorsed. There was a need to introduce the Strengthening Laboratory Management Toward Accreditation (SLMTA) (4) programme in the EMR as in other WHO regions.

The technical working group constituted by the directors of public health laboratories in the EMR

held their first meeting in March 2023 to review implementation of the 2016–2020 framework, finalize the strategic priorities for the next regional framework, and develop a strategy to implement SLMTA in the EMR.

Summary of discussions

The new strategic framework identifies 6 strategic goals: strengthen leadership and governance of national laboratory systems; strengthen the organization and management of national laboratory systems towards quality; establish sustainable, sufficient and competent human resources for laboratory service delivery; ensure a safe and secure laboratory environment; promote effective, tiered and integrated laboratory referral networks (in-country and among countries) and enhance coordination; and promote rational and evidence-based use of laboratory services.

Participants discussed each of the strategic goals and made recommendations on how to implement the framework and achieve its goals within the given timeframe.

Recommendations

The following are key recommendations from the meeting:

For Member States

Conduct advocacy at all levels nationally to strengthen coordination and integration of laboratory services and laboratory networks within the health systems to better meet country needs and in line with the principles of One Health approach.

Adopt the SLMTA approach in implementing quality management systems with established laboratory accreditation processes.

Develop relevant policies and procedures to enhance clinical laboratory service delivery and sustainability of quality services.

Develop and implement national regulatory frameworks to systematically manage biosafety and

biorisk in laboratory settings.

Build the capacity of laboratory personnel to enhance the collection, storage and shipment of specimens as well as evidence-based test selection and results interpretation.

For WHO

Support training of trainers on laboratory quality auditing and mentoring.

Support access to SLMTA tools as well as mapping and engagement of existing SLMTA partners in the region.

Support mapping of existing regional accreditation institutions and existing regional biosafety certification capacity.

Support advocacy with the ministries of health and other relevant decision-makers for the adoption of SLMTA.

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