29 May 2024 – World Hand Hygiene Day (WHHD) has been marked for 16 years to advocate for hand hygiene as an evidence-based, practical approach to infection prevention and control (IPC) in health care settings. This helps limit the risk of epidemics and pandemics and control the spread of antimicrobial resistance (AMR).

Countries the world over, including in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, must prioritize hand hygiene at every level of the health system – from policy-makers to facility managers, medical professionals, and patients using health services. Hand hygiene is an integral part of the Global Infection Prevention and Control Strategy, launched by WHO in 2023, in close consultation with Member States.

As the Region navigates ongoing conflicts and humanitarian crises, the need for effective IPC is even more evident. This is a critical moment to seize the gains from the COVID-19 response and convert temporary solutions into long-term capabilities to strengthen health systems and health security.

Media coverage of conflicts and other emergencies in the Region often overshadows messaging about evidence-based disease prevention. Yet media outlets have a critical role to play in reaching diverse audiences and educating them on the importance of IPC, including hand hygiene.

WHO sees the media as a key stakeholder in public health response, and especially disease prevention. As such, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean hosted a dedicated media training session on the importance of IPC and hand hygiene. The hybrid event was held on 7 May 2024, on the margins of WHHD 2024, in Cairo, Egypt, and virtually.

A mapping of media coverage of IPC and hand hygiene was carried out prior to the workshop. This helped to identify knowledge gaps as well as the angles that journalists are most interested in.

Twenty journalists specialized in reporting on public health issues in the Region joined the training in person in Cairo. Sessions featured open discussions and presentations from regional experts working in IPC and other cross-cutting programmes, such as AMR; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); patient safety; and emergency preparedness.

Humanitarian workers with experience of conflict-affected contexts, as well as health workers and youth representatives, shared real-life scenarios to highlight the value of disease prevention on the ground.

This initiative aims to enhance regional promotion, visibility and sustainability of IPC measures, including hand hygiene, and bring people together in support of scaling up IPC and WASH capacities. The benefits of doing so include improved readiness to respond to infectious disease outbreaks, disasters and conflicts across the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

The training proved a success, as shown by the significant increase in the volume of media requests for interviews with WHO experts on IPC following the workshop. More television and radio programmes were recorded and more articles published on IPC, including hand hygiene and WASH and their critical role in health emergencies and cross-cutting programmes.

Journalists who took part in the training expressed great enthusiasm to continue the narratives around IPC. They saw the workshop as not only a unique learning and networking experience, but also a forum that offered them a wealth of information. Attendees learned in particular about the economic impact of IPC and about its unique role in the response to ongoing public health emergencies and humanitarian crises in the Region.

This training offered an optimal platform and unique learning experience to help close the knowledge gap on IPC at this crucial time in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. It serves as a starting point to further expand and enhance communication on IPC across the Region.

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