29 January 2024, Cairo, Egypt – To mark the World Health Organization's 75th anniversary, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean hosted a networking and partner and staff appreciation event last night, at the Grand Egyptian Museum, Cairo, under the theme "Painting a healthier and safer future together".

The aim was to renew commitment to our shared regional goal of Health for All by All. The event also highlighted WHO's efforts to promote primary health care and advance universal health coverage to ensure that no one is left behind, even in the context of the ongoing health emergencies across the Region.

The event brought together a wide range of senior officials representing the government of the Regional Office's host country, Egypt; the diplomatic corps; other United Nations entities; donor

agencies; the WHO Foundation; and nongovernmental organizations.

Guests were received by WHO senior officials led by the outgoing WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari and the Regional Director-elect Dr Hanan Balkhy.

In his welcome remarks, Dr Al-Mandhari emphasized the vital importance of continuity, solidarity and unity to achieve Health for All by All: “As we commemorate 75 years of work to promote health, keep the world safe and serve the vulnerable, we need to continue to work together to realize a future in which the right to health is a given. In my 5 years as WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, I have seen first-hand the impact of fragile health systems on communities and how lives can be altered in the blink of an eye. I have also seen the power that functioning health systems have to transform lives for the better.”

On display was a selection of children’s artworks inspired by the WHO75 milestone, from various countries of the Region. Guests were also able to view a selection of photographs reflecting WHO’s work in the field – particularly in emergency settings.

A special session on universal health coverage gave guests a glimpse of the 45-year journey of primary health care in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The session was led by senior experts from WHO headquarters and the Regional Office.

In recognition of the country’s generous hosting of the Regional Office since 1949, a special WHO75 award of gratitude was presented to Egypt, represented by both Dr Mohamed Awad Tag-El Din, Advisor to the Egyptian President for hHealth Affairs, and Dr Amr Kandil, Assistant Minister of Health and Population.

All WHO Regional Directors for the Eastern Mediterranean from 1949 to date were recognized at the event for their service to public health. It was a gesture that honours the past and the role that successive WHO leaders have played to paint a healthier and safer future for the Region.

The recognized Regional Directors were:

Dr Aly Tewfik Shousha, 1949–1957

Dr Abdul Hussein Taba, 1957–1982

Dr Farouk Partow (Regional Director a.i.), 1982

Dr Hussein A. Gezairy, 1982–2012

Dr Ala Alwan, 2012–2017

Dr Mahmoud Fikri, 2017

Dr Jaouad Mahjour (Regional Director a.i.), 2017–2018

Dr Ahmed Al-Mandhari, 2018–2024

In her closing remarks, Regional Director-elect Dr Balkhy emphasized the need to safeguard health care and make it more accessible and affordable, even in the context of emergencies and for those in hard-to-reach areas.

Dr Balkhy highlighted the enormous capacities and opportunities in the Region: “I feel encouraged by many examples of success in the past, the latest of which is Egypt’s achievement of WHO Gold Tier status on the path to eliminating hepatitis C. By working together, we can replicate and expand such milestones across the Eastern Mediterranean Region, including eradication and elimination of polio, neglected tropical diseases, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.”

Art for Health, a WHO-generated concept, was introduced at the event. This approach focuses on how to use art as a platform to increase awareness of health issues, enhance behaviours that support better health and well-being, and promote health messages. Campaigns are planned around the theme of “Health for All. Art for Health”.

The event was also an ideal occasion to highlight the WHO Foundation, an independent foundation set up to mobilize resources in support of WHO’s mission to promote health, keep the world safe and serve the vulnerable.

This event marking WHO’s 75 year journey through celebrating the connection between art and health was made possible thanks to the generous support of the Grand Egyptian Museum; its managing company, Legacy; and maestro Omar Khairat, the renowned Egyptian musician, whose spellbinding performance made the evening a truly memorable one.

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