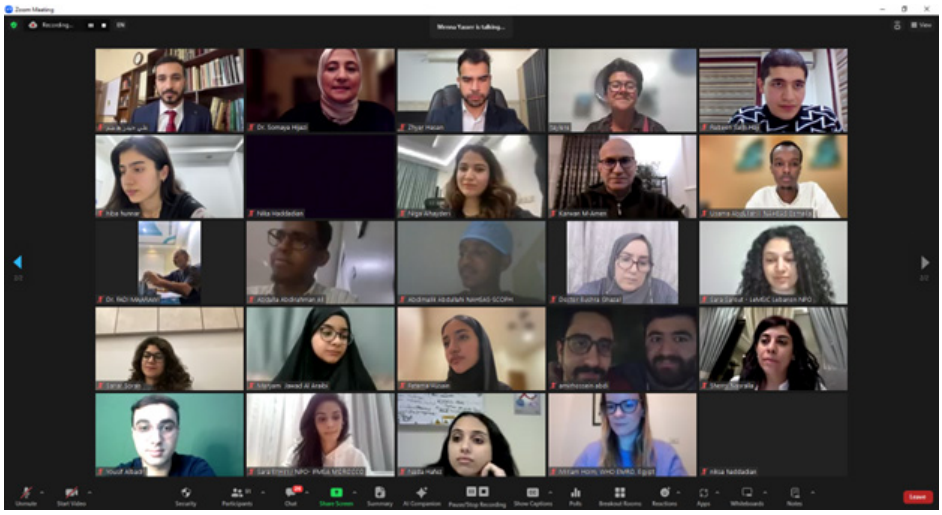

23 January 2024 – The WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region has some of the highest and fastest-growing rates of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) globally, owing to widespread antibiotic misuse and overuse. Nearly 1.3 million people are already dying as a direct result of AMR worldwide. High rates of drug resistance undermine many health efforts and make health care more complex, expensive and risky.

The AMR unit in the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean is currently strengthening the AMR response through multiple intersectional strategies. These focus on key stakeholders identified at various levels and prioritize work with health care students and young health professionals.

Young people in health care are the future prescribers, dispensers and administrators of antibiotics. We must educate, engage and mobilize them as advocates for behaviour change among current and future generations. Within the Region’s cultural contexts, health workers wield significant power in their communities. They influence the health decisions of their families and peers and also work in primary health care, where most antibiotics are dispensed.

In the lead up to World Antimicrobial Resistance Awareness Week 2023 and the recent release of the “WHO AWaRe (Access, Watch, Reserve) antibiotic book”, the Regional Office’s AMR unit launched a new competition for university students and young health professionals, on “Tackling the misuse and overuse of antibiotics in the Eastern Mediterranean Region” in September 2023.

Young people have a critical role in any health system and an inherent ability to generate innovative and creative ideas and solutions, as well as communicate, create content, share information and mobilize their peers. The competition aimed to draw on these skills to support the book's release and encourage its use among health workers.

The WHO AWaRe antibiotic book provides advice for health workers on antibiotic selection, dose, route of administration and treatment duration. We hope that the book will become a go-to resource for health workers across the Region, making proper infection management easier.

Competition response and results

The competition was divided into 2 tracks: Track 1, which saw groups or individuals submit short videos and compete regionally; and Track 2, in which groups submitted activity proposals and competed within the country. Both tracks aimed to invite innovative ideas and creative messaging to use to introduce the book to newly qualified health professionals and students.

Across both tracks, we received 83 submissions from 13 of the Region's countries: 44 videos from 8 countries for Track 1, and 39 proposals from 9 countries for Track 2.

A panel of jurors from the Regional Office filtered and evaluated the submissions. For Track 2 entries, the relevant WHO country office also carried out a further evaluation step. Predetermined matrices and extensive criteria were applied to find the most innovative and influential submissions to support the WHO AWaRe antibiotic book, promote action against AMR, and encourage the proper prescription and dispensing of antibiotics.

We were delighted to see immense efforts reflected in the submissions, as well as a very diverse profile of contributors from across the Region. The evaluation process was highly competitive as a result.

In the end, 4 winners were chosen for Track 1: Ali Haider Hashim Alhadi, Iraq, took first place; followed by Beirut Arab University's pharmacy students, Lebanon, in second place; with Zhyar Hasan Yaseen, Iraq, and the University of Bahrain's College of Health and Sport Sciences nursing students, Bahrain, tying for third place. Three more entries were given honourable mentions: Yousif Albadri, Iraq; Qatar University's dental students, Qatar; and the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations–Morocco, Morocco.

For Track 2, 8 winners were selected from different countries for the chance to receive an award of up to US$ 1000 to support the implementation of their proposals in 2024. The winners were: University of Bahrain pharmacists, led by Fatema Abdelkereem, Bahrain; Rethink Antibiotics, Egypt; Tehran University of Medical Sciences students, led by Mohammad Mahdi Raeis Zadeh, Islamic Republic of Iran; Hawler Medical University students, led by Niga Alhayderi, Iraq; Jordan Pharmaceutical Students' Associations, Jordan; Lebanese Medical Students' International Committee, Lebanon; University of Aleppo medical students, led by Ghina Maarawi, Syria; and the National Health Students' Association of Somalia, Somalia.

The AMR unit of the Regional Office held an online Winners' Announcement Ceremony to name and celebrate the winners. More than 200 health professionals and students attended virtually. Attendees had the chance to watch the winning videos and learn more about the implementation plans of selected groups. They were also able to give their feedback on the competition and recommendations for future engagement opportunities.

Young health professionals are the backbone of the current and future health workforce. We are delighted to see them advocate for action on AMR and promote the use of the WHO AWaRe antibiotic book among colleagues, fully aware of their critical role in preserving the efficacy of our current antibiotics. In light of the competition's success, we are excited to create more opportunities to engage young health professionals in 2024 and empower them to act as change agents for better prescribing behaviour.

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