

Challenges facing health of migrants to be tackled at key meeting

MADRID | 3 MARCH 2010 -- The World Health Organization, the International Organization for Migration and the Spanish Government, which currently holds the rotating European Union presidency, are opening a Global Consultation on Migrant Health in Madrid today. Millions of migrants face multiple health risks, including poor access to health care, poverty and exploitation during the sometimes perilous journeys they undertake in search of a better life.

Some 100 participants from various government sectors across the world, representatives of non governmental agencies, United Nations agencies, inter governmental agencies, migration networks, academics and experts are gathering in Madrid to reach consensus on priority areas and strategies to address health issues associated with the speed, volume, and complexity of modern migration.

There are approximately 214 million international migrants and 740 million internal migrants worldwide. While most migrants are healthy, undocumented migrants, people forced to migrate due to natural or man-made disasters, and groups such as victims of trafficking, often suffer exploitation and physical and mental abuse.

Many factors limit migrants' access to health services, increasing the risk of poor health outcomes. These include poverty, stigma, discrimination, social exclusion, language and cultural differences, separation from family and socio-cultural norms, financial and administrative hurdles, and legal status. Other risk factors can be directly related to the conditions under which they migrate, for example cases of forced migration or clandestine travel.

"The health of migrants is a growing concern for European health policies," said José Martínez Olmos, General Secretary of Health of the Government of Spain. "It is one of the several dimensions that must be tackled if we want to reduce inequities. Spain, during its European presidency tenure, has made this a priority for action in the health domain."

Inspired by the 2008 World Health Assembly Resolution on the Health of Migrants, the Madrid Consultation aims to address and overcome the obstacles to generating comparable global data on the health of migrants; to identify policies and legislation that advance the health of migrants; to identify key actions to create migrant-sensitive health systems; and to develop or strengthen national, regional and global platforms to foster dialogue between the various sectors involved in migration and health.

"Migration is one of the main social determinants of health in the 21st Century. The health of migrants is a central element for social cohesion for contemporary societies. Access of migrants to health care has become of paramount importance to rights' based health systems and to public efforts aimed at reducing health inequities," said Daniel

Lopez Acuna, the Director of Strategy, Policy and Resource Management, of the Health Action in Crisis Cluster of WHO.

Davide Mosca, the Director of IOM's Migration Health Department, said there is a need for multiple sectors, including health, and a wide range of country partnerships to ensure coordinated and harmonized policy approaches to provide appropriate health care to migrants, enhance access to services and provide social protection for migrants.

"The right to health applies to all migrants, irrespective of their migratory status," said Mosca. "Unfortunately, migrants, especially undocumented ones, all too often hesitate to come forward to seek the medical assistance they deserve. We therefore need to define minimum standards of access to healthcare based on fundamental human rights and sound public health policies and practices. This requires strong partnerships across sectors and between countries where migrants leave from, transit through or are received."

Contacts

IOM

Jean-Philippe Chauzy
Head, Media and Communication
+41 22 717 93 61
+41 79 285 43 66
www.iom.int

WHO

Paul Garwood
Communications Officer
Health Action in Crises
Mob: +41-794755546
Off: +41-22-791-3462
garwoodp@who.int
<http://www.who.int/disasters>