Iran launch of Arabic Preventing Chronic Disease: a vital investment
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Honourable Ministers, distinguished Representatives, Regional Director Dr Gezairy, and colleagues.

Good morning. I would first like to begin by thanking Dr Gezairy and our colleagues here at EMRO for organizing this event.

As you have just seen in the video, there is a ferocious global epidemic of chronic disease raging in every corner of the planet. There is not one country, not a community, and scarcely a family left untouched by heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes, or other chronic diseases.

It does not discriminate for age, gender or income. It is afflicting developed and developing countries. It is not, as we have just seen in the video, a problem only of older people: more and more people are dying prematurely in the prime of life. It must, and can, be stopped.

The WHO report, Preventing chronic disease: a vital investment, was launched globally in October last year. Today, we are launching the Arabic version of the report and will present to you data focusing on the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean Region.

Last year, an estimated 35 out of 58 million total global deaths were due to chronic diseases.

This means that 60% of all deaths in 2005 were chronic-disease related.

The 35 million chronic disease death toll is double the number of deaths from all infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, maternal and perinatal conditions, and nutritional deficiencies combined.
Let's take a closer look at the situation the Region.

When we examine all the causes of death in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region, we see that more than half of all deaths last year were from chronic disease – with cardiovascular diseases such as heart disease and stroke being responsible for close to 30% of all deaths. Cancer and chronic respiratory diseases are also major causes of mortality.

Just a note to add: the impact of diabetes is vastly underestimated because although people may live for years with diabetes, their underlying cause-of-death is usually recorded as heart disease or kidney failure.

Deaths from chronic diseases are projected to increase over the next ten years. If current trends continue, statistical projections show that over the next ten years in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, 25 million people will die from a chronic disease.

Deaths from infectious diseases, maternal and perinatal conditions, and nutritional deficiencies combined will decrease by 10 percent, while deaths from chronic diseases will increase by 25 percent. Most markedly, deaths from diabetes will increase by 50 percent.

We must bear in mind that these alarming statistics describing the rising number of deaths related to chronic diseases are only part of the picture: each year millions of people are taken ill with these diseases and as a result are disabled, their ability to work is hampered, families are burdened with their care and the expense of treatment, often for years.

Shakeela Begum, whom we interviewed for the report, illustrates this point well.

Shakeela had a heart attack ten years ago, at the age of 55. She still hasn't fully recovered from the ordeal, saying she lives in constant fear that she'll have another heart attack.
Shakeela spends most of her time looking after her grandchildren and rarely leaves the house other than for food and medication. She says she sometimes feels as though she is not much help to the family, as she gets tired very quickly.

Because of financial reasons, Shakeela cannot afford to buy a sufficient amount of the medication she must take for the rest of her life. She also chooses to take what medication she does have sparingly so as to save money for her grandchildren.

Shakeela's situation shows how the ongoing medication expenses for poor people suffering from long-standing chronic diseases often create difficult choices.

(slid: 6: Causes of chronic disease)

The causes of Shakeela's illness and this chronic disease epidemic are well established and well known. The three most important risk factors that we can do something about are:

- unhealthy diet
- lack of adequate physical inactivity, and
- tobacco use.

As you can see these risk factors in turn cause a number of intermediate risk factors: raised blood pressure, raised glucose levels, raised cholesterol - here labelled as 'abnormal blood lipids', and overweight and obesity. In many countries, these risks are rapidly increasing.

(slid: 7: Risks are increasing)

For instance, taking the risk factor of overweight: Already we are alarmed that an estimated 1.6 billion people over the age of 15 are overweight globally.

If current overweight trends continue, it is expected that the numbers of overweight and obese people will increase in almost every region of the world, including the Eastern Mediterranean Region, as you can see on this slide.

In the next 10 years, WHO predicts 46% of men and 60% of women in the Eastern Mediterranean Region will be overweight!

By 2015, it is estimated that over 2.3 billion people will be overweight worldwide.
And that will have, and is already having, a serious impact. The burden of chronic disease:
  • has major adverse effects on the quality of life of affected individuals;
  • causes premature death;
  • and creates large adverse – and underappreciated – economic effects on families, communities and societies in general.

Chronic diseases undermine the macroeconomic development of countries. Our report shows that many countries will forego billions in national income over the next 10 years as a result of premature deaths caused by heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.

The good news in all this is that chronic diseases are in fact easily preventable. 80% of all premature heart disease, stroke and type 2 diabetes and 40% of all cancer can be prevented by healthy diet, regular physical activity and not using tobacco.

This slide shows what is possible. The way forward is clear – see the rapid improvements in heart disease death rates in some high-income countries such as the UK, Australia, and Canada.

But sadly the picture is not the same for many low and middle income countries - look at Russia … this shows the work still to be done.

So what can countries in the Region do? What works?

Chronic diseases can be prevented and controlled using available knowledge. The stepwise framework offers a flexible and practical public health approach to assist ministries of health in balancing diverse needs and priorities while implementing evidence-based interventions. Comprehensive and integrated action is required.
Comprehensive action requires combining population-wide approaches that seek to reduce the risks throughout the entire population with strategies that target individuals at high risk. Even a small shift in the average population levels of several risk factors can lead to a large reduction in the burden of chronic disease.

Integrated prevention and control strategies are most effective. Integrated approaches focus on the common risk factors: unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and tobacco use. They deal with a number of related diseases such as heart disease, stroke and diabetes, at the same time.

*(slide 11: the global goal)*

At the global launch of the chronic disease report in October last year, we announced a bold yet achievable global goal. The global goal proposes a target of an additional 2% annual reduction in projected chronic disease death rates between 2005 and 2015.

The scientific knowledge to achieve this goal already exists. Pursuing this goal would result in 36 million chronic disease deaths averted by 2015. 2.3 million of those lives saved would be from the Eastern Mediterranean Region - and more than half these lives saved would be in people under the age of 70.

Today, you will be taking a great step forward by signing a joint statement committing to action that will help achieve this 2% goal.

*(slide 12: status quo)*

We are at a cross roads. Either we continue as before, or we act – now…

The causes are known. The way forward is clear.

I commend all of you here today for taking the problem of chronic disease seriously and considering it as a priority for the Region. The Joint Statement on Chronic Diseases you are signing today shows your commitment to help stop once and for all this devastating epidemic.

Thank you.