

Foreword



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Cancer is a major public health issue in the region causing considerable morbidity and mortality. In Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) countries, cancer ranks as the second to fourth most common cause of death. Each year, thousands of people are diagnosed with cancer in the region and more than half of the patients eventually die. The impact of cancer on individuals, families, communities, and health systems is well documented globally.

While many countries in the EMR have shown an increase in life expectancy, reduced maternal and child mortality coupled with health system development, they are also challenged with an increasing incidence of cancer burden and mortality. Evidence has shown that our region can expect a doubling of cancer incidence by 2040 due to ageing and growth in the population alone, without even taking into consideration the high regional prevalence of risk factors such as smoking, unhealthy diets and air pollution. Therefore, the pertinent question that remains is how ready are we to face the increasing incidence of cancer?

Planning for cancer prevention and control is now more critical than ever before. Well informed and country-tailored national cancer control plans (NCCPs) are essential to mitigating the growing burden and cost of cancer and to help cope with the increasing demand on national health systems, while ensuring that core cancer prevention and control interventions are made available to the population. Considering the significance of cancer for premature noncommunicable disease (NCD) mortality, well-implemented NCCPs will also contribute to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goal Target 3.4 to

reduce premature deaths from NCDs by 30% by 2030.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic exposed health system weaknesses, yet it gives us the opportunity to strengthen and build back better. The World Health Organization (WHO) continues to support countries to ensure effective and equitable cancer care, and we remain focused on reducing cancer morbidity and mortality, investing in cancer control and paving the road towards achieving universal health coverage in its member states. WHO's global initiatives (Global Initiative on Childhood Cancer, Cervical Cancer Elimination Initiative and the Global Breast Cancer Initiative) provide strategy and technical support to national level strengthening of these cancer programmes as part of overall national cancer control plans and as an integrated part of the regional commitment in line with the regional framework for action on cancer prevention and control.

Controlling cancer will require strong collaboration among various sectors, including civil society organizations, academia, and other partners to implement cancer control policies and address community needs and priorities. In our efforts to achieve this, it is encouraging that we can lean on a high-level commitment to universal health coverage in the region.

My hope and expectations are that by highlighting the region's needs and priorities in the *Cancer Control: Eastern Mediterranean Region Special Report* there will be an opportunity for cancer communities to advocate more widely for advancing the cancer control agenda in the EMR. Together, we can reverse the tide of cancer, avoiding millions of unnecessary deaths and cancer-related suffering in the region. ■