



The Eastern Mediterranean Public Health Network (EMPHNET)

EMPHNET NEWS

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In this issue:

- EMPHNET's Word by Executive Director, Dr. Mohannad Al-Nsour
- EMPHNET Conducts Pre-conference Workshops
- Fifth EMPHNET Regional Conference Commences with Calls For Public Health Network Cooperation
- Conference Guests and Participants Gather for Roundtable Discussions
- Oral and Poster Presentation Highlights
- The Closing Ceremony

EMPHNET's Word By: Dr. Mohannad Al-Nsour, Executive Director

2016 was a very active year for EMPHNET that concluded in December with the Fifth EMPHNET Regional Conference in Marrakech, Morocco.

EMPHNET adopted *Regional Contributions to Global Health Development* as its conference theme to focus on the efforts made by countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) in protecting the health of communities in the region and promoting health beyond their national borders.

The conference had a rich and diverse program starting with three pre-conference workshops: *Bio-Risk Analysis in Research for Public Health Scientists*; *Innovative Surveillance and EpiCore*; and *FETP-Frontline in the EMR*. These were designed to introduce the latest developments in innovative surveillance, field epidemiology, and biorisk management, ones which can be employed to serve the needs of public health systems and to optimize public health practice.

The conference program also featured sessions of oral and poster presentations where Field Epidemiology Training Program (FETP) graduates, residents and other public health scientists from over 10 countries in the EMR displayed scientific studies investigating common public health problems. Their studies covered areas of communicable diseases, non-communicable diseases, surveillance systems, and others of relevance. Their investigations form an important part of efforts made to resolve a wide range of health problems affecting the region.

In roundtable discussions, we were joined by representatives of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Biosecurity Engagement Program (BEP), the Training Programs in Epidemiology and Public Health Interventions Network (TEPHINET), and the ministries of health from EMR countries. In insightful discussions, these experts provided recommendations into issues specific to the needs and challenges of public health in the EMR such as public health management, FETPs, inter-organizational cooperation, polio eradication, and the fight against viral hepatitis.

The Fifth EMPHNET Regional Conference was a success that would not have come about had it not been for the support of our team and partners. On behalf of the EMPHNET team, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Moroccan Ministry of Health for hosting the conference. I would also like to acknowledge MediPIET for joining us in the opening ceremony and other conference activities, as well as our other partners, particularly the CDC, BEP, and TEPHINET.

EMPHNET Conducts Three Pre-conference Workshops

EMPHNET conducted three pre-conference workshops on December 5, 2016 at the Palm Plaza Hotel in Marrakech, Morocco. The purpose of the workshops was to provide participants and attendees with relevant and up-to-date training sessions. These workshops were *Bio-Risk Analysis in Research for Public Health Scientists*, *FETP Frontline in the EMR*, and *Innovative Surveillance and EpiCore*.

Workshop on FETP-Frontline in the EMR

This workshop was designed to inform participants of the FETP-Frontline, a three-month in-service program designed to train members in reporting and responding to disease outbreaks and other public health threats. In the FETP-Frontline, members learn and practice the fundamental skills used in surveillance such as the use of case definitions, disease detection and reporting, summarization of surveillance data using simple tables and graphs, interpretation of data for decision-making, and surveillance monitoring and evaluation.

Countries that have implemented FETP-Frontline have seen increased capacity among staff to report and analyze surveillance data, thereby creating a network of well-trained surveillance officers in these countries. This workshop targeted Ministry of Health officials from different countries who attended the Fifth EMPHNET Regional Conference and were interested in learning more about FETP-Frontline and implementing it in their countries.



The facilitators were Dr. Richard Dicker, Head of CDC's FETP Curriculum Development Unit and Mr. Bassam Jarrar, Deputy Director at the Division of Public Health Systems and Workforce Development at CDC. Dr. Dicker and Mr. Jarrar gave descriptions of the FETP pyramid, comprised of FETP-Frontline, FETP-Intermediate, and the two-year FETP-Advanced program. A presentation was also given on the curriculum and the general implementation strategy, including the pre-requisite conditions, planning process, and implementation steps needed to launch an FETP-Frontline. Ways to adapt and customize the implementation strategy to suit the individual need of countries in the EMR were also outlined.



EMPHNET presented the pilot FETP frontline training in Egypt and Jordan planned to be implemented during 2016-2017. In a general discussion, participants shared ideas on the program's curriculum, potential cohort members, and the need to adapt the program to country-specific needs.

The Conference Mobile Application

The Fifth EMPHNET Regional Conference mobile application was developed as online platform for guests and participants of the conference to make them more connected to the various activities of the conference program. Available on Google Play, the application enabled users to access real-time information of the events, personal-

Workshop on Bio-Risk Analysis in Research for Public Health Scientists



This pre-conference workshop aimed to train participants in identifying, assessing, managing, and communicating bio-risks associated with research activities done in laboratories and in the field. The workshop served to address the increased risk of accidental or intentional exposure to pathogens during the process of public health research.

Topics discussed included the Laboratory Biorisk Management Standard, the Biorisk Management AMP Model (Assessment, Mitigation and Performance), and Bioethics and Dual Use Research of Concern (DURC). The facilitators were the EMPHNET biosecurity team; Dr. Meryem Lemrani, a researcher at the Pasteur Institute in Morocco; and Dr. Samira Senouci, the former Head of the Department of Microbiology at National Institute of Hygiene in Morocco.

Each lecture used case studies specific to incidents which occurred in Egypt, Yemen, Tunisia, and Pakistan, facilitating group activities among participants about plausible risks associated with life science research and appropriate mitigation and communication strategies for addressing the risks. These case studies were developed using published research.

Workshop on Innovative Surveillance and EpiCore

This workshop was designed to highlight innovative surveillance tools that can complement and enhance traditional surveillance to detect and respond to disease outbreaks and public health threats. It specifically focused on the regional contributions made through the utilization of the EpiCore, an innovative surveillance system that enables faster global outbreak detection and reporting by linking a worldwide member network of health experts through a secure online reporting platform. EpiCore was developed by TEPHINET, the Skoll Global Threats Fund, HealthMap, and ProMED-mail.

Dr. Marjorie Pallock from ProMed-mail presented the components of traditional and innovative surveillance. Dr. Pallock also introduced participants to the EpiCore system and guided them on how to register to EpiCore and become an official member.

Dr. Erin Sorrell, Assistant Professor at Georgetown University, co-facilitated a focus group session conducted with EpiCore members to enquire about their experience with the EpiCore platform.

Case studies were also presented to spotlight the impact of innovative surveillance on major public health events. A case study was presented on chikungunya in Mauritius and Reunion Island; meningitis in Kenya; and MERS-CoV in Saudi Arabia.



Fifth EMPHNET Regional Conference Commences with Calls For Network Cooperation

The opening ceremony of the Fifth EMPHNET Regional Conference took place on December 6, 2016 at the Hotel Les Jardins de l'Adgal in Marrakech, Morocco. The ceremony was a joint opening with the Annual Scientific Conference of the Mediterranean Program of Intervention Epidemiology Training (MediPIET), as both conferences were directed by similar themes. EMPHNET's was *Regional Contributions to Global Health Development*, while MediPIET's *Protecting Public Health Across Borders*. The opening day reflected the synergy between EMPHNET and MediPIET in strengthening public health in the Eastern Mediterranean Region and neighboring countries.

The ceremony started with welcoming addresses delivered by Dr. Yves Souteyrand from the World Health Organization - Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office (WHO-EMRO) in Morocco; Dr. Andrea Schwarz from the European Commission's Directorate General for Health and Food Safety; Dr. Dionisio Herrera, TEPHINET's Director; Prof. Abdurrahman Maaroufi, Director of Epidemiology and Disease Control at the Moroccan Ministry of Health; Dr. Karl Ekdahl, Head of Public Health Capacity and Communication Unit at the European Center for Disease Control and Prevention (ECDC); Mr. Jose J. de Domingo, Team Leader of EUROsociAL Health Projects at MediPIET; and Dr. Mohannad Al-Nsour, EMPHNET's Executive Director. Keynote speeches focused on the need for collaboration among public health organizations, considering the unfortunate circumstances that befall the region.



EMPHNET and MediPIET Hold Roundtable Discussion on Public Health Network Synergies

The theme of collaboration was echoed in the joint roundtable which ensued: *Creating Synergies Between Regional Public Health Networks: Together for Better Health Protection*. The panelists of this roundtable were Dr. Mohannad Al-Nsour, Executive Director of EMPHNET; Dr. Karl Ekdahl, Head of Public Health Capacity and Communication Unit at the European Center for Disease Control and Prevention (ECDC); ; Dr. Kip Baggett, Chief of CDC's Workforce and Institute Development Branch; Dr. Silvia Bin, Associate Professor of Infectious Diseases at the Institute of Public Health in Tirana, Albania; and Prof. Nissaf Bouafif, Head of Preventive Medicine and Epidemiology Department at Tunis University.



Speakers focused on the importance of improving cooperation among public health organizations and uniting efforts against regional and wider public health threats. The discussion emphasized the role public health networks can play in providing health protection and advancing global health security. The discussion also explored the challenges that hinder synergies among public health networks such as budget constraints and recruitment of administrative staff. The discussion on technical challenges focused on the nature of services provided as a result of joint cooperation.

Conference Participants and Guests Gather for Roundtable Discussions

Equipping and Mobilizing Rapid Response Teams to Rise to Current Challenges

This roundtable provided an overview of rapid response capacities in the region, focusing on the technical and political challenges facing Rapid Response Teams (RRTs) and ways to improve their existing tools. It explored ways to develop multi-sectoral rapid response teams that are well connected to the national system and supported by the international community.

Mr. Michael Gerber, Chief of the Emergency Response and Recovery Branch at CDC gave a presentation on the RRT initiatives of CDC and EMPHNET. Mr. Gerber presented the achievements of CDC's response activities to major outbreaks, including Ebola, Zika, Cholera, and Yellow Fever in countries around the world in Asia, Europe, Africa, North America, and South America. He also outlined EMPHNET's achievements in training staff and developing RRT guidelines.



Discussions also focused on public health rapid response development as one of the steps to comply with the International Health Regulations (IHR, 2005) and the Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA). The discussion recommended adopting common standards and improving coordination at the national and international levels to mobilize teams for a timely response.

Global Health Security Agenda

This roundtable was designed to brief participants IHR new monitoring framework, the Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA) and the ongoing Joint External Evaluation (JEE) missions in the EMR.

Chief of CDC's Workforce and Institute Development Branch Dr. Kip Baggett, discussed the GHSA, the IHR, and the JEE mission to evaluate the implementation of IHR. He also dedicated a section of his presentation to the role of FETP Benin in contributing to multiple JEE technical areas. Dr. Ezzeddine Mohsni, EMPHNET's Global Health Security Advisor, spoke about the IHR Monitoring and Evaluation Framework and the Global IHR Implementation per Region. The National Focal Point of IHR in Morocco, Prof. Abderrahmane Maaroufi, briefed attendees on the situation of the JEE and the IHR in Morocco.



The discussions focused on major gaps in IHR core capacities identified during the JEE mission for Pakistan, Qatar, Morocco, Lebanon, Jordan, Sudan, Tunisia, Somalia, and Bahrain. The gaps included challenges that face the IHR implementation, such as technical deficiencies and the absence of needed legislation and standards. Panelists recommended that countries develop a plan of action to address such gaps, assess the commitment to IHR implementation, and identify the need for external support from the World Health Organization (WHO) and other partners.

Responsible Conduct of Science Within Regional Biosecurity Policies and Capacities

The aim of the roundtable discussion was to identify challenges that might hinder policies and practices to mitigate bio-risks and prevent disease outbreaks. Panelists were Dr. Tarek Al Sanouri and Dr. Nisreen Alhmoed from EMPHNET, and Dr. Sapana Vora from the Biosecurity Engagement Program (BEP). EMPHNET highlighted the need for multinational and national cooperation to create and put into practice standard biosafety and biosecurity measures in the region.



Representatives from Jordan, Iraq, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan discussed the importance of combating chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats by conducting risk assessments, performing mitigation measures, and improving infection control. Members of the audience also emphasized the need for relevant training, inter-sector coordination, and public health surveillance in laboratories.

Leadership and Management: A Critical Link in Public Health Workforce and Institutional Development

In this roundtable, panelists explored the need to train public health managers and outlined existing efforts in public health management at both the regional and global levels.

Prof. Ahmed Idrissi from the National School of Public Health in Morocco gave a presentation on the school's Leadership and Management Training, and Dr. Mohammed Essbou from the Jordanian Mutah University provided a presentation on MED-HEALTH, the Erasmus-funded master's degree program planned to be implemented at the university. Mr. Bassam Jarrar from CDC highlighted the organization's efforts to strengthen management in public health.

Ms. Erika Willacy, Program Lead for CDC's training program Improving Public Health Management for Action (IMPACT), briefed attendees on this new program led by regional ministries of health and designed to enhance existing management and develop a cadre of highly-trained public health managers.

During this roundtable, panelists and attendees stressed the role of effective management in enriching research, theory, and scientific innovation for successful public health action. They emphasized the need for skilled managers in a public health workforce because they can provide organization, direction, and oversight of public health initiatives, programs and institutes.



Polio Eradication

The discussion on polio eradication focused on the existing risks of polio transmission in Iraq in the context of accelerating conflict. The status of polio eradication efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan - two countries in the region still endemic to the disease - were also discussed.



The roundtable included a presentation by Dr. Najibullah Safi from the Ministry of Public Health in Afghanistan on the status of polio eradication in his country. Dr. Rana Jawad from FELTP Pakistan gave a presentation on efforts to stop the poliovirus transmission in Pakistan. In this roundtable, panelists and attendees emphasized the prospective role of FELTP graduates and residents assigned to Expanded Programs on Immunization (EPI) in improving routine immunization. Acknowledging current challenges in polio-endemic countries, they also stressed the need for international cooperation to resolve these challenges.

Viral Hepatitis

This roundtable discussed the achievements made by Egypt, Morocco, and Pakistan in the prevention and control of viral hepatitis, particularly hepatitis B and hepatitis C, and debated on their experiences to enhance access to new hepatitis medicines. Prof. Maaroufi spoke about the situation of hepatitis in Morocco, especially concerning the Regional Action Plan for the Implementation of the Global Strategy for Viral Hepatitis (2017-2021). Dr. Hamida Khattabi from the WHO-EMRO talked about the Regional Action Plan for the Implementation of the Global Strategy for Viral Hepatitis. From FELTP Pakistan, Dr. Rana Jawad presented a study on Acute Viral Hepatitis Sentinel Surveillance in Pakistan.



Attendees stressed the fact that although viral hepatitis is leading cause of death in the EMR, controlling the disease has been neglected. Thus, there was a consensus that access must be accelerated to hepatitis prevention and treatment- with a focus on hepatitis B and hepatitis C.

Oral and Poster Presentation Highlights

Sessions of both oral and poster presentations covered a range of topics including Non-Communicable Diseases, Vaccine Preventable Diseases, Maternal Health, Child Health, Respiratory Diseases, Antibiotic Resistance, Hepatitis and HIV, and Surveillance Systems. Most poster presentations fell under the category of Surveillance Systems; the majority of oral presentations covered studies under the Zoonotic and Vector Borne Disease and Other categories.

Presenters were FETP residents and graduates from Afghanistan, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Yemen. Presenters who were unable to attend the conference made video and audio recordings of their presentations which were played during the sessions.

Based on evaluations which assessed presentations on delivery on content, one winner was selected for both best oral and poster presentations. Dr. Abdul Wahhab Jawad from Iraq won the Best Oral Presentation for his abstract *Risk Factors of Low Birth Weight Among Newborns in Al-Zahraa hospital /Al Najaf Al Ashraf Province, Iraq, 2016*. Dr. Abid Saeed from Pakistan won the Best Poster for her abstract *Crimean Congo Hemorrhagic Fever (CCHF) Cases Investigation Analysis Baluchistan Province 2016*.



Social Gathering of the Conference

Conference guests and participants gathered at the Chez Ali Restaurant in Marrakech for its famous *Fantasia Dinner and Show* - a traditional Moroccan meal followed by a lively performance of folk dance and singing. The conference guests joined the dancers and showed some moves with a spirit of fun and culture!

The Closing Ceremony

The conference closing ceremony took place at the Palm Plaza Hotel on December 8, 2016. Speakers were Dr. Ahmed Rguig from the Moroccan Ministry of Health; Dr. Mohannad Al-Nsour, Executive Director of EMPHNET; and Dr. Dionisio Herrera, Director of TEPHINET. In keeping with the conference theme, the speakers once again emphasized the need for future collaboration in the region in meeting global health needs. Dr. Robert Fontaine from the CDC presented awards for Best Oral and Best Poster Presentations, and recognition awards for TEPHINET and the Moroccan Ministry of Health for their contribution to the success of the conference. Certificates were also presented to the winners of EMPHNET's photo and writing contests.

