

Message from the REGIONAL DIRECTOR



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

World AIDS Day this year comes with news of advancements in understanding and responding to the HIV epidemic. We have witnessed positive changes in commitment, attitudes and response interventions. However, the HIV pandemic continues to be characterized by persistent stigma and discrimination against those living with the infection and those most vulnerable to it. World AIDS Day 2010 is therefore dedicated to reflecting on human rights in the context of universal access to HIV prevention, treatment and care.

Let me remind you that this pandemic is still striking humankind very hard: there are 33.4 million people living with HIV today, and for every 2 people that gain access to treatment 5 others become infected. But we must not give up. The efforts and resources dedicated to fight HIV are bringing results, and new programmes are reaching out to those most in need and most vulnerable.

Most countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region are still experiencing low prevalence in comparison to other areas of the world. Nevertheless, we are seeing the prevalence of HIV grow among the most-at-risk populations, reaching concentrated epidemic levels in several countries of the Region. We still have a window of opportunity to control the epidemic. This must be through inclusive policies that de-stigmatize and reach out to populations at increased risk and to people living with HIV.

A key to highest standards of health in relation to HIV is knowing our HIV status. However, most people living with HIV in the Region are not aware of their HIV status. Furthermore, it is estimated that only 13.1% of those in need of antiretroviral therapy are actually receiving it. Scaling up HIV testing and counselling is therefore a critical step for increasing access to services. But people will only seek HIV testing if they feel secure in doing so, and if they think they will benefit from it.

Despite the positive steps taken in the Region to increase the availability of voluntary confidential HIV testing services, access to them is still very limited. The scarcity of services, combined with low risk awareness, and a very real fear of stigma and discrimination are hampering a higher uptake of voluntary testing. A rights-based approach to HIV testing and counselling responds to this situation by observing confidentiality, consent and provision of counselling to those tested.

Universal access to HIV prevention, treatment and care means universal access for all people, irrespective of who they are, how they live and what they do. The right to the highest attainable level of health for every human being is a fundamental value in WHO's Constitution. It is only by dismissing our prejudices that we can observe this right for all. We must re-double our efforts, challenge policies of mandatory testing, and demand and work for strict confidentiality around HIV. A human rights approach is the only way to universal access. And universal access is a human rights imperative.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'H. Gezairy'.

Hussein A. Gezairy MD FRCS
WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean