



**World Health  
Organization**

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR **Europe**

## **Annual session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe Copenhagen, Denmark, 15–18 September 2014**

Thursday, 11 September 2014

### **Press conference statement of Ms Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe**

Good morning and welcome to UN City.

Every year in September, our Regional Committee – WHO’s decision-making body for the European Region – meets to discuss and take decisions on key public health matters. This year, we will have more than 350 public health decision-makers from our 53 Member States. We are expecting over 23 ministers of health from across the WHO European Region, including from many countries in the European Union. Our Patron, Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Mary of Denmark will address the Committee on Monday, 15 September. Dr Margaret Chan, WHO’s Director-General, will also be here, as will many international partners and stakeholders.

This is the first time that the event is being held in the new UN City in Copenhagen.

Together with our Member States, we have prepared a full and interesting agenda for this four-day meeting. We will present the delegates with **the progress report on the implementation of the WHO European policy framework, Health 2020**. The Committee will review the achievements of Health 2020 since its launch in 2012 and how our Region is tackling inequities in health through an effective whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. The report offers an analysis of the Region-wide advances in health and health policy so far. It also defines our vision for the years to come, which is focused on ensuring that all people have access to health services and on the principle of universal health coverage – both are central to our interests and our efforts.

To support countries in their adoption and implementation of Health 2020, we will launch the Health 2020 implementation package; this is a set of new tools that will exist as an online resource for the use of any Member State. It includes communication tools, background documents, services and other helpful resources.

Next on the agenda is **our new five-year food and nutrition action plan**. In this area, we are addressing an extremely important issue: the issue of removing *trans* fats from the food supply and reducing *trans* fat consumption among the population. This is one of the most straightforward public health interventions for reducing the risk of cardiovascular diseases and some cancers, and improving diets. More than 50% of adults in WHO European countries are overweight or obese, and in several of those countries the rate is close to 70% and rising. Obesity is responsible for 2–8% of health costs and 10–13% of deaths in different parts of the Region.

Europe now leads the world in the number of countries that have taken action to eliminate *trans* fats from our diets. Denmark's virtual ban on the sale of products containing *trans* fats in 2003 was a worldwide first. A growing number of countries in our Region have recognized that taking action in this area may bring significant health gains, and new data indicate that such action is highly effective. The plan that we hope will be adopted next week will help them in that work.

The **European Action Plan on Vaccination**, when adopted, will help in scaling up immunization rates. The European Region's success in immunization has looked increasingly fragile after sustaining some hard blows in the last five years.

Each year, almost 1 million children in the Region do not receive all their scheduled vaccinations, resulting in 90 000 cases of measles and 70 000 cases of rubella being reported in the past three years. There were almost 32 000 cases of measles in 2013, compared to 7100 in 2007, and many of these outbreaks were in high-income countries. The goal of measles and rubella elimination by 2015, which was deemed achievable when set, is now gravely threatened.

Europe's pockets of unvaccinated, vulnerable population exist either because people fall through the cracks of the system or because of vaccine refusal. Equity in immunization is one of the main pillars of the Action Plan. It makes a clear appeal to countries to work towards this by tailoring their immunization services to ensure they are available and easy to access for all. It also calls for improved monitoring and surveillance and movement towards registering vaccinations online in order to track population immunity and make evidence-based decisions.

The Committee will also discuss **the issues of children and adolescents' health and the new strategy for the next five years**. I think you all know that Europe includes the countries with the lowest number of infant and child deaths in the world. But what you may not know is that it also includes those where children are 25 times more likely to die before age 5. Also, the healthy children and young people are not as healthy as they could be. Injuries, mental disorders, tobacco and alcohol use, obesity and malnutrition cause premature death or jeopardize their future health.

Much of ill health and death is preventable. Low-cost measures that have been shown to work – whether they target road traffic accidents or poverty – could prevent two thirds of deaths. And for that reason we are being very active in assisting countries in adopting or adjusting their policies, and encouraging them to adopt a life-course, evidence-informed and rights-based approach in tackling existing problems.

I would like to stress an interesting part of the strategy, which is the first to address the adverse effect that digital and electronic media can have on children and adolescents' health. There is recognition of the fact that, while presenting new opportunities, digital and electronic media can raise challenges in relation to exposure to cyber-bullying, pornography and Internet addiction. The strategy calls for more advanced policies in that area.

**The European child maltreatment prevention action plan** deals with a serious problem that is common in the Region. It is estimated that, by the age of 18 years, 18 million children may have suffered sexual abuse and 44 million, physical abuse. Every year, over 850 children

under 15 years are victims of homicide. And these figures are only the tip of the iceberg, as data are scarce or unavailable.

The goal of the plan is unprecedented: it aims for reductions of 20% in child-maltreatment and child-homicide rates in the Region by 2020.

**To wrap up on the action plans**, with this strong set of policies on the table, this Regional Committee is rather exceptional. We have put all these action plans forward because we believe that, at the regional and national levels, they are critically important to all our Member States. We do not for a moment believe we can carry out these plans alone, which is why we need our partnerships with other United Nations agencies, and with regional and bilateral donors and civil society. Representatives of many of them will come to Copenhagen to attend the Committee.

And before I close and we move on to your questions, here is some very brief information on other items on the Committee's agenda.

A series of technical briefings will be organized for the representatives, where they will consider such important areas as:

- migration and health
- nursing and midwifery
- a country focus for the WHO Regional Office for Europe
- health information
- women's health.

Our communication team will organize press briefing for you on some of these topics, and you will have an opportunity to listen and talk to our experts about them.

The Committee will also cover other issues of importance to the whole Region, including:

- the Millennium Development Goals and the post-2015 agenda;
- the issue of Ebola virus disease;
- progress reports on HIV/AIDS, antibiotic resistance, reduction of the harmful use of alcohol, prevention of injuries and the future of the European environment and health process; and
- last but not least, the work that we have been doing on WHO reform and its implications for our Region.

All this gives us a very rich programme coming up. You almost wonder how we are going to get through all that in the course of a few days, but we are ready for it, and I hope you found the background papers and the press programme that our communication team has prepared for you of interest.