

Jordan is One of Eight Arab Countries Facing Inequalities in Vaccine Programs

Pneumonia and Meningitis Vaccine Inequality Persists throughout Middle East

Arab Alyaum (Amman) by Mansour Mualla

7 May 2009

“There is a great difference in vaccine availability among Jordanians, especially with regard to who can pay a vaccine’s high price and who cannot,” said Dr. Najwa Khuri-Bulos, chair of the Scientific Committee of the Vaccination for the Next Decade Conference. “This imbalanced situation plagues Jordan as it does other Arab countries, including Syria and Egypt, which are considered middle-income countries. It is especially difficult for these countries to afford new vaccines for their children because these countries are not considered poor countries, so they are ineligible for GAVI or WHO funding,” Dr. Najwa Khuri-Bulos added.

The Conference launched a “Call to Action” to work toward providing these new vaccines to all children in the Arab world. The doctors called for increased attention to middle-income Arab countries’ struggle to provide essential new vaccines for their children.

“According to WHO, child pneumonia and meningitis are accountable for 70 percent of children’s death in the Arab world, while pneumonia causes 63,000 child deaths yearly worldwide,” Dr. Najwa Khuri-Bulos said. She added, “Jordan’s vaccination program is very good, and Jordan has achieved a lot in this regard, but unfortunately, pneumococcal and meningococcal vaccines are still only available for wealthy children here, through private clinics.”

At a press conference held yesterday under the headline “Vaccination—the right of all children everywhere,” Dr. Khuri-Bulos called on the Arab world to create a fund to support vaccination programs in the Arab world and to eliminate the obstacles that prevent including all new vaccines in these programs. International statistics and studies indicate that 8,000 children die each year from meningitis, and more than 1 million children in the Arab world are affected by pneumonia. 50,000 of them die yearly.

“Great discrepancies have emerged in the economic status between Arab countries in the past few decades. Some have high incomes, while others are either in the low-middle income or low-income categories. This disparity has led to different vaccination strategies among these countries,” said Dr. Najwa Khuri-Bulos.

Although infectious disease spreads easily across borders in this integrated region, only children from the wealthiest countries of the Arab region generally have guaranteed access to these important vaccines. “Infectious disease does not respect borders—a disease outbreak in a poor Arab country could easily affect even the richest and most advanced countries in the region. This indicates the necessity of

cooperation between Arab countries to find common solutions,” Dr. Najwa Khuri-Bulos added.

“Nearly all life-threatening meningitis is preventable with Hib, pneumococcal and meningococcal vaccine,” said Dr. Rana Hajjeh, director of the Hib Initiative, and Director of the Bacterial Diseases Division at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, USA. “We need to ensure that all Arab countries are able to provide these life-saving vaccines to their children—if we fail, children will continue to die needlessly or develop severe complications from these diseases.”

“Vaccines are also an incredibly economical means of improving health and wellbeing for all. By preventing illness, they reduce the burden on health care systems and help families save money on medical expenses, allowing them to make other investments. Healthy children perform better in school and grow up to be productive adults, referring to the Latin- America experience,” said Dr. Ciro de Quadros, Executive Vice President of the Sabin Vaccine Institute in Washington, D.C.

“WHO and international experts are convinced that vaccines should be available to all children, and Arab policy-makers must work to ensure that this issue is priority on their countries agenda,” said Mr. Miloud Kaddar, senior health economist at WHO.

The meeting “Vaccination for the Next Decade in the Arab World” is organized by the Arab Pediatric Association, in conjunction with the Union of Arab Pediatricians, and the Pan Arab Pediatric Infectious Disease Society, and leading international experts on child survival and vaccines from the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region, UNICEF, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Sabin Vaccine Institute and the Harvard School of Public Health. The conference has the patronage and support of Jordan’s Minister of Health, with the participation of more than 1,000 experts and doctors.