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Protecting children's future with vaccines

By **Ciro de Quadros and Najwa Khuri-Bulos**

Every child has the right to a healthy future. Yet throughout the Middle East, vast gaps between rich nations and their less wealthy neighbours persist.

Tragically, one consequence of this inequality has become glaringly evident in the health of our children. While rich Arab states have made massive strides in improving public health, other countries still suffer from high rates of child death.

As paediatricians in this region, we strongly feel that it is our duty to prevent the meaning of "rich" and "poor" from translating into "healthy" and "sick".

This week, public health officials from across the Middle East will be meeting in Amman to confront the challenge of providing vaccination to every child in the Arab world. At the second Pan-Arab Paediatric Infectious Disease Society meeting, they will consider the way Arab countries can work together to improve access to immunisation and ensure that all children receive the protection they deserve. The conference will serve as a platform addressing the gaps in vaccination among children from different Arab countries, and will raise awareness about the benefits of under-used vaccines to promote public health.

In Latin America, a region similarly connected by common history and cultural identity, the Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO) has promoted vaccines as a right for all children. Although many Latin American countries

struggle to afford vaccines, policymakers have unequivocally supported vaccine introduction there through whatever means necessary.

PAHO has helped Latin America find innovative strategies for ensuring that all its children have equal access to vaccines, regardless of nationality. To do this, it has united countries in recognising the value of the vaccines, and helped find ways to provide them to children in countries both rich and poor. These approaches are just some of many options, but we must start now to find solutions appropriate to the Middle East. If we fail, children will continue to die unnecessarily.

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Vaccines are essential tools for reducing child health gaps in the Middle East. Widespread immunisation has eliminated smallpox and virtually wiped out polio and measles. New vaccines against common deadly illnesses such as rotavirus, Hib, pneumococcus, HPV and hepatitis A have the potential to save millions of lives, reduce inequities, and greatly improve health-

care across the Arab world.

The major causes of pneumonia and diarrhoea, two diseases that together are the top causes of child death worldwide, are partially preventable with Hib, Pneumococcal, and Rotavirus vaccines. These vaccines could significantly contribute to countries' ability to meet Millennium Development Goal 4, a pledge by all the world's governments to reduce child deaths by two thirds before 2015. Still, many Arab countries have not managed to provide these vaccines to all their children.

Even Hib vaccine, which many Arab countries have successfully introduced, is not yet used equally here. While Oman, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have approached near-universal immunisation, nearly half of Libyan and a quarter of Lebanese children remain vulnerable to Hib disease, which causes deadly pneumonia and meningitis. Other countries, including Egypt and Tunisia, have not yet found ways to incorporate these vaccines into their national programmes at all.

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.

Beyond the economic factors facing individuals and families, vaccination issues have regional significance. Infectious disease does not respect borders, and in countries as interconnect-

ed as those of the Middle East, which share so many cultural elements, this fact has broad implications.

Economic migrants, tourists and refugees travel frequently across international borders. Incomplete vaccine coverage in some countries threatens to undermine advances in public health across the region. A disease outbreak in a poor Arab country could easily affect even the richest and most advanced countries in the region.

While wealthy countries can easily afford vaccines independently and poor countries are eligible for international financial assistance, the lower-middle-income countries of the Arab world are often overlooked as they struggle to fund public immunisation programmes of their own and incorporate new vaccines into their regimens.

The region needs to prioritise vaccines for all its children, regardless of nationality. Policy makers and health professionals alike need to work together to ensure the pride and the strength of the Middle East and protect one of its most precious resources: its children.

Ciro A. de Quadros is the executive vice president of the Sabin Vaccine Institute in Washington, DC. He served as director of the Division of Vaccines and Immunisation at the Pan-American Health Organisation. Najwa Khuri-Bulos is chair of the Union of Arab Paediatricians Infectious Disease Committee and professor and division head of infectious disease of the Department of Paediatrics at the Jordan University Hospital. They contributed this article to The Jordan Times.