

Joint press release
Copenhagen, Stockholm, 18 March 2014

Tuberculosis cases down by 5% each year but Europe failing to cure majority of multidrug-resistant patients

Across the 53 countries of the WHO European Region, an estimated 353 000 patients fell sick with tuberculosis (TB) in 2012, according to new data published by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and the WHO Regional Office for Europe. The data show an average annual 5% decline in TB incidence across the Region over the last decade. The countries of the European Union and European Economic Area (EU/EEA) observed a 6% decrease in TB cases with 68 000 reported cases in 2012. Overall, the EU/EEA countries met their target of an average five-year decline. However, Europe has not yet met the set targets for successful treatment of multidrug-resistant TB

Much has been done to control TB in countries of the European Region since the launch of the *Framework Action Plan to Fight Tuberculosis in the European Union* in 2008 and the adoption in 2011 of the *Consolidated Action Plan to Prevent and Combat Multidrug- and Extensively Drug-resistant Tuberculosis in the WHO European Region 2011–2015*. Access to MDR TB treatment has been scaled up three-fold compared to 2011, but challenges still persist: every single day nearly 1000 people across Europe are estimated to fall sick with TB. Particularly multidrug- and extensively drug-resistant TB (M/XDR TB) pose a serious risk to the goal of eliminating TB across Europe by 2050.

Of the 27 countries worldwide with a high burden of MDR TB, 15 belong to the WHO European Region, accounting for an estimated 76 500 MDR TB patients. Not even half of these have been diagnosed due to limited laboratory capacity in the countries, and only 50% of the MDR TB patients in the Region are reported to have been successfully treated. In the EU/EEA, the treatment success rates of MDR TB patients have remained stable at very low levels: only one in every three (34%) patients in the reporting EU/EEA countries completes MDR TB treatment successfully. More than half die, are not treated successfully, or are lost to follow-up. At 25%, the treatment success rate for XDR TB patients was even lower.

“There is an urgent need for new anti-TB medicines with shorter and more effective treatment regimens and we must reach all patients, not only half of them and ‘half the way’”, says Zsuzsanna Jakab, WHO Regional Director for Europe. “For the first time in 40 years, new TB drugs have become available but their scope is limited to specific groups of patients. Other drugs are currently under clinical trial. A key objective for new treatments should be to reduce the duration from two years to two weeks. We need to put patients at the centre of care in the spirit of *Health 2020*.”

The Director of ECDC, Marc Sprenger, stressed: “If we are not able to diagnose and treat patients with MDR TB early and successfully, this not only puts patients’ lives at risk but also paves the way

for XDR TB. This is why it is essential to enable healthcare workers across Europe to fully support all MDR TB patients during the full course of treatment and make sure they finish it successfully.”

The goal to eliminate TB by 2050 depends on the development of new drugs together with diagnostics and vaccines. WHO is working in close collaboration with the Stop TB Partnership to enable and promote research towards developing new diagnostics, drugs and vaccines. In 2013, WHO developed guidance for the introduction of new medicines. ECDC plans to develop specific guidance to assist EU Member States with the introduction of new TB drugs.

NOTES TO EDITORS

World TB Day is celebrated on 24 March each year around the world. The overall goal of the Day is to raise awareness about the burden of tuberculosis (TB) worldwide and the status of TB prevention and control efforts.

The **WHO European Region** comprises 53 countries with a population of nearly 900 million people, of which around 508 million live in the EU/EEA (28 EU Member States plus Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway).

The WHO ***Consolidated Action Plan to Prevent and Combat Multidrug- and Extensively Drug-resistant Tuberculosis in the WHO European Region 2011–2015*** aims to strengthen efforts to address the alarming problem of drug-resistant TB in the Region. Diagnosing 85% or 225 000 M/XDR TB patients and treating at least 75% of them successfully are key 2015 targets of the Plan to which all European countries subscribed in 2011.

The long-term goal of the ***Framework Action Plan to Fight Tuberculosis in the European Union*** is to control and ultimately eliminate TB in the EU/EEA countries. The Action Plan aims to increase political and public awareness of TB as a public health issue in the EU; support and strengthen EU Member States’ efforts against TB in line with the national epidemiological situation and challenges, and contribute to the control of TB in the EU by supporting those countries from which imported cases originate.

Drug-resistant tuberculosis is manmade and results from inadequate treatment management of TB patients like irregular treatment regimen prescription, poor compliance to treatment plans or sub-optimal dosing due to biological variations in drug uptake. The key to preventing the development of drug resistance, multi-drug resistance or extensive drug resistance is to provide patients with the correct multidrug TB treatment regimen for the entire treatment time.

Developing new anti-TB drugs is a complex process and implies high economic investments. These life-saving drugs should be broadly accessible to all patients in need. Better incentives are needed to encourage more research and development (R&D), including the definition of innovative incentives and development of new business models.

Health 2020 is the new European health policy framework. It aims to support action across government and society to: “significantly improve the health and well-being of populations, reduce health inequalities, strengthen public health and ensure people-centred health systems that are universal, equitable, sustainable and of high quality”.

Information sources

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ECDC resources

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WHO resources

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