

HIGHLIGHTS OF CONFERENCE KEYNOTE PRESENTATIONS

SECTION II: HIGHLIGHTS OF CONFERENCE KEYNOTE PRESENTATIONS

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OVERVIEW

The fourth biennial conference had the privilege of securing distinguished national and international authorities to deliver keynote presentations designed to address the main themes of the conference. During the first day of the conference, John Seffrin, PhD, CEO of the American Cancer Society and president of the Union of International Cancer Control and Sabri Belgacem, MD, MPA, FFPHM, director of Systems and Services Development of the WHO-Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office in Cairo, Egypt delivered presentations on tobacco and health and noncommunicable diseases, respectively. During the second day, Admiral John O. Agwunobi, MD, the assistant secretary for health at the United States Department of Health and Human Services and a pediatrician by specialty, delivered the keynote address.

The following paragraphs provide summaries of these addresses with the details of the presentations of Seffrin and Belgacem incorporated within the Section III, Tobacco and Health and Section VI, Global Health, respectively. Agwunobi's remarks are accounted for in this section.

SEFFRIN: TOBACCO AS A GLOBAL HEALTH THREAT

In his address, Seffrin discussed tobacco as a global health threat and the leading cause of cancer worldwide. He highlighted trends in tobacco use across the globe, with special reference

to the Middle East where the incidence of lung cancer, especially among young men, is increasing at an alarming rate. According to Seffrin, deaths from cancer in developing countries, including the Middle East, are clearly linked to tobacco use and the increased risks associated with lifestyle behaviors, including obesity and lack of physical exercise. Public health officials face major challenges in helping individuals to quit smoking and in preventing young men and women from starting.

Seffrin emphasized several points:

- Tobacco is the only consumer product proven to kill more than half of its regular users.
- Tobacco will be responsible for 4.9 million deaths worldwide this year alone.
- If today's trends continue, the cancer burden in the developing world will more than triple in the next 25 years, resulting in a global total of 10 million deaths worldwide each and every year.
- Tobacco will kill an estimated 650 million people alive today, half of whom are now children.
- Half of these people killed by tobacco will die in middle age, when they are most productive for their economies, their societies and their families.

Without intervention, the tobacco pandemic will be the worst case of avoidable loss of life in recorded history. Lung cancer has surpassed prostate cancer incidence among men in Tunisia, Algeria and Jordan. In one US study of Arab Americans in Dear-

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born, Michigan, 62% of respondents reported smoking at least half a pack of cigarettes each day. Another study of young Arab Americans smokers revealed more were exposed to environmental smoke at an earlier age than the US national average.

The political and economic strength of the tobacco industry is a major obstacle, especially with the enhanced recruitment of new smokers in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, Seffrin told conference participants. The nefarious marketing techniques used to lure more of the world's children into deadly addiction is particularly problematic. As smoking rates decline in the United States and many other industrialized nations, the tobacco industry has dramatically stepped up its efforts in emerging markets in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Worldwide, one in seven teens, aged 13 to 15, smokes, 25% of them having tried their first cigarette before the age of 10. Nearly 100,000 children and adolescents become addicted worldwide every day.

In the last segment of his keynote address, Seffrin discussed the world's first global public health treaty—the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). Developed by the World Health Organization (WHO), FCTC was formally adopted and ratified by 40 nations at the World Health Assembly in 2003. The FCTC was formed to protect the citizens of member countries from the tobacco industry's marketing techniques by banning all tobacco advertising and promotion and by requiring that warning labels cover at least 30% of cigarette packaging. The treaty also has developed efforts to shield citizens from secondhand smoke, increase tobacco excise taxes, prevent cigarette smuggling, promote public awareness of the deadly consequences of tobacco use, provide greater access to treatment for nicotine dependence, and provide more stringent regulation of tobacco products.

BELGACEM: NONCOMMUNICABLE DISEASES

Sabri Belgacem, MD, MPA, FFPHM, focused on the growing morbidity and mortality related to noncommunicable diseases (NCD) in the Arab world. Countries in this region are at different stages with respect to their epidemiologic and demographic transition and many low- and some middle-income countries face the double burden of disease. However, the trend is toward an increase of risk factors and non-communicable diseases.

The rise of the main risk factors affecting noncommunicable diseases, such as tobacco, obesity, lack of physical activity, and high blood pressure, is statistically supported and indeed alarming. Unhealthy lifestyles are also growing among younger populations and are being exacerbated by globalization and extended communication, particularly through the very popular satellite channels in the region. Ischemic heart and vascular diseases and cancers represent the major causes of morbidity and mortality in the Arab world.

Most countries of the region are developing noncommunicable disease (NCD) control strategies and programs focusing on health promotion and advocacy of healthy lifestyles in terms of eating habits, smoking cessation and increased physical activity. Efforts are being made to improve the knowledge about morbidity and mortality by noncommunicable diseases by improving national health information systems and by introducing national and subnational registries.

Considering the financial pressures within the countries of the region, their ability to address risk factors and noncommunicable diseases is costly for the already strained health systems. Some countries are investing in more cost-effective strategies for health promotion starting at school and in work settings. All countries are beginning to

realize the paramount importance of investing in empowering individuals and communities to take active responsibility in health promotion.

WHO is providing technical support in developing national NCD programs, in developing guidelines for managing risk factors and noncommunicable diseases, and in promoting national and regional NCD registries. WHO also encourages networking between professionals from the region in order to facilitate sharing of experiences and good working models.

AGWUNOBI: USDHHS, ACCESS AND EFFORTS TO KEEP ARAB AMERICANS HEALTHY

In his remarks, Admiral John O. Agwunobi, MD, offered an overview of the mission of the United States Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) and emphasized the department's dedication to public health and its long-standing history of providing services with compassion. As he thanked the conference speakers and participants for their efforts to increase the knowledge and understanding of health issues related to Arab Americans, Agwunobi emphasized that the USDHHS relationship with ACCESS is a long-term partnership in the fight against disease. He made particular note of the combined work of his department and ACCESS in developing solutions for diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, most difficult to address openly in the Arab American community, and he saluted ACCESS for breaking that silence.

Agwunobi spoke of the diverse ethnic and geographic spectrum of the US population and that many living in the United States continue to have family members, friends and loved ones in other countries. The environment of globalization also introduces concerns regarding the ease by which infectious

diseases can travel and affect populations in all parts of the world. His message concentrated on the need for preparedness for such threats. He cited some current and historical examples, most notably: the Avian influenza. This infectious disease has spread from southeast Asia into eastern Europe to the Middle East and now into middle Africa. Scientists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health are concerned about a pandemic resulting from this disease that can overwhelm the capacities of health systems.

Agwunobi indicated that, based on historical patterns of three major pandemics that took place in the last 100 years (1918, 1957 and 1968), it is likely that the United States will experience a pandemic in the future. These pandemics could result from natural or biological causes and not necessarily the Avian influenza. Since such a pandemic

would affect every community and very likely many regions and nations simultaneously, it is imperative that communities, cultures and religions come together to minimize the devastating effects. Such a cooperative effort is more successful when built on relationships that have been established and nourished.

A true test of humanity would be to witness how nations reach out and care for all in need around the world if, for example, the Avian influenza became a pandemic with rapid transfer from one human to another. Real-life crises were introduced by hurricane Katrina in 2005, with victims and devastation relating to many of us with afflicted family members and friends in the disaster area.

Such tragedies can, and have, occurred in remote places with similar devastation and with lack of resources and timely help. The need for education

and preparedness to deal with such disasters can not be over-emphasized. According to Agwunobi, these efforts must be initiated at the community level and not dependent on federal help; it is estimated that at least 40% of the government workforce would be sick in a pandemic. Agwunobi referred the audience to the website, <http://www.pandemicflu.gov>, for more information.

Also in his remarks, Agwunobi characterized the rise in tobacco use and poor nutrition as pandemics affecting many populations, including Arab Americans. He praised the efforts of ACCESS and the conference in raising awareness of these risks and designing and implementing strategies to combat them. Simply stated, Agwunobi insisted that the message, "cigarettes kill," must be repeated through every channel possible. Other important messages should emphasize physical activity and healthy diets.