

EECA Region SORT IT

Operational research to tackle TB in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: Moving forward during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Tuberculosis (TB) still remains to be in the top ten causes of death and *Mycobacterium Tuberculosis* a top “killer” among all infectious agents. Member States of World Health Organization (WHO) European Region notify 23% of globally detected multidrug-resistant TB (MDR-TB) and 70% of globally detected extensively drug-resistant TB cases each year. Vast majority of these patients are from the countries of eastern Europe and central Asia (EECA), many of which are considered to be high burden countries for MDR-TB [1,2]. To make a progress towards TB elimination it is necessary to meticulously research and understand all the enablers across the world, which should be followed by appropriate policy and practice changes. This is why research and innovation is one of the three pillars of both the WHO End TB Strategy and the TB Action Plan for the WHO European Region 2016–2020 [3,4]. Most recently WHO developed The Global Strategy for TB Research and Innovation, was adopted at seventy-third World Health Assembly in August 2020 (<https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/10-08-2020-member-states-adopt-the-global-strategy-for-tb-research-and-innovation-at-73rd-world-health-assembly>). Interventions of the national TB Programmes should be based on solid scientific evidence generated through operational research, which in turn would contribute to health systems becoming more effective, efficient, and patient-oriented. In the WHO European Region the European TB Research Initiative (ERI-TB) facilitates effective capacity building and creates enabling environment for operationalization of the global policies on TB research [5].

The Structured Operational Research and Training Initiative (SORT IT) hosted at the UNICEF/UNDP/World Bank/WHO Special Programme for Research and Training in Tropical Diseases (TDR), provides an established framework for implementing country-specific operational research studies that lead to actual actions with better health related outcomes afterwards [6,7].

In this special edition, 9 papers from the sub regional SORT IT course for EECA, implemented jointly by TDR and ERI-TB in 2019-2020, were presented. The course aimed to build research capacity among representatives of non-governmental organizations and TB affected communities. Researchers were enrolled in the course from Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Tajikistan and Ukraine.

Research studies from Ukraine provided evidence on how the optimized case finding can multiply TB detection among population at risk for TB, how opioid substitution therapy improves TB treatment outcomes and evaluation of mental health interventions for TB patients with alcohol use disorders. Studies from Tajikistan explored novel and adapted drug-resistant TB treatment regimens for children and contributed to the knowledge on how the digital and molecular technologies can improve timely linkage to care. Short- and long-term outcomes of video-observed treatment in TB patients were explored in a study from Republic of Moldova. Optimized adherence support in relation to treatment outcomes were studied in Georgia. A study from Kyrgyzstan demonstrated increase treatment success rates in patients receiving short treatment drug-

resistant TB treatment. Finally, HIV testing uptake and its impact on treatment outcomes were explored in a study from Armenia.

Conducted research projects cover four priority themes for the region: case detection and screening, access to treatment and compliance, optimizing treatment regimens, collaboration with HIV programmes, which are considered by WHO as essential elements in improving programmatic implementation and treatment outcomes [8]. All studies describe major implications and might contribute to improvement treatment and care for TB patients. It is remarkable that all the studies were completed during the challenging times of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic.

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