

Mapping Palliative Care in the Arab World

Samy A. Alsirafy

Palliative Medicine Unit, Kasr Al-Ainy Center of Clinical Oncology and Nuclear Medicine, Kasr Al-Ainy School of Medicine, Cairo University, Cairo, Egypt; alsirafy@kasralainy.edu.eg

The Arab World consists of the 22 countries of the Arab League with a population of 0.4 billion ¹. The estimated number of new cancer cases in the Arab World exceeds 325,000 ² and many of them present in an advanced stage and are in need for palliative care. In countries of the World Health Organization (WHO) Eastern Mediterranean region (EMRO), which include most of Arab countries, it is estimated that only 5% of those in need for palliative care receive it ³.

To date there is no project dedicated to mapping the level of palliative care development in the Arab world. However, fortunately, Arab countries were included in three palliative care mapping projects. In 2014, the Global Atlas of Palliative Care at the End of Life was published as a joint project between the Worldwide Palliative Care Alliance (WPCA) and the World Health Organization (WHO) ⁴. The WPCA-WHO atlas classified countries according to the level of palliative care development from “no known palliative care activity” to “advanced health system integration of palliative care”. None of the Arab countries was classified in the integration level and the best example was Jordan which was the only country classified in the generalized provision level ⁴. An advantage of the WPCA-WHO atlas is that it compares counties and regions to each other at a global level. However, with the ongoing advances of palliative care in Arab countries; an update is warranted.

During the 15th European Association for Palliative Care World Congress which took place in Madrid in May 2017, I had the opportunity to attend the launching of two new atlases published by the International Association for Hospice and Palliative care. The two atlases that included valuable information about the status of palliative care in Arab countries are the APCA Atlas of Palliative Care in Africa ⁵ and the Atlas of Palliative Care in the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMRO) ⁶. The EMRO Palliative Care Atlas included information about 13 out of the 19 Arab countries in the EMRO region. Six Arab countries (Bahrain, Djibouti, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen) were not included because key informants representing these countries could not be identified or could not participate in the project ⁶. The APCA atlas included African Arab countries including the three Arab countries not affiliated to the WHO-EMRO region; Algeria, Comoros and Mauritania ⁵. Two out of ten African Arab countries were not included in the APCA atlas, Djibouti and Somalia.

The APCA and EMRO palliative care atlases included updated and more detailed information about

the development of palliative care in Arab countries. The atlases detailed the number and types of palliative care programs in each country. In addition, information about palliative care education, policies and professional activities was illustrated. Opioids availability and consumption data were also presented.

The new information mentioned in the APCA and EMRO atlases provides evidence that palliative care is progressing in many Arab countries. However, considering the Arab World as a whole, palliative care is underdeveloped. Governments of Arab countries are called to take serious steps in developing palliative care through policy, education and opioid availability (especially morphine) according to the WHO recommendations ⁷ and the 2014 World Health Assembly resolution on palliative care ⁸.

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