

# Semi-annual Bulletin

Half year summary (January - June) 2024  
Volume 4; Issue Number 1; 2024



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ME'NA-ISN



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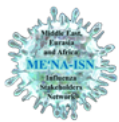


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## Message from the Chairperson



*Dr. Salah Al Awaidy is a medical doctor, and holds a Masters in Epidemiology with current post of Communicable Disease Surveillance and Control Adviser to the office of the Undersecretary of Health Affairs at the Ministry of Health, Oman. He currently advises on eradication, elimination and control of communicable diseases of public health importance, in addition to the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI), vaccine supply chain system and International Health Regulations.*

*From 1997 to 2012, Dr. Al Awaidy held the post of Director of Communicable Disease Surveillance and Control, MOH, Oman.*

*He played a pivotal role in reducing the national under five mortality and morbidity, preparedness, management and control of infectious diseases like SARS, avian influenza, pH1N1 and in establishing national communicable diseases, AEFI and Rotavirus surveillance, as well as in the eradication of Polio, Measles, Rubella, CRS and leprosy in Oman. In addition, he played a fundamental role in reducing mortality and morbidity of vaccine-preventable diseases for pediatric, adolescence and adult populations.*

*Under his leadership, Oman achieved Polio-free, Measles-free, Rubella-free, Draculosis-free and CRS-free status, neonatal tetanus elimination and control and near elimination of Hepatitis B and other VPDs like TB and Schistosomiasis. Oman received the first ever certification that the Central Vaccine Store fulfilled all the criteria expected of WHO/UNICEF in 2003 and 2004. As a result, Oman has achieved and maintained almost 99% immunization coverage regionally and nationally. In June 2012, he was honoured by the CDC as the highest achieving person in Oman. In the international arena, Dr. Al Awaidy has represented a number of important global advisory groups, namely the TAG on Poliomyelitis Eradication in Pakistan & Afghanistan since 2013, Advisory Group on Immunization (SAGE), WHO Geneva (2005-2007), Strategic Advisory Group on Vaccine and Store Management Training Courses (2005-2008), Strategic TB Advisory Board (2007-2011), the AIDS Regional Advisory Group (ARAG), EMRO since 2005 and he has been a member of the GAVI Independent Review Committee since 2014. He also currently serves on the IHR Emergency Committee on Polio and MERS-CoV. He has been a member of the polio Transient Independent Monitoring Board (TIMB) and Polio RTAG as well as a member of the regional verification commission for Hepatitis B control, the EU diabetes and influenza group, the Global Task Team of Pandemic Influenza Vaccine Response WHO, HQ, -2020-till date and Global Task Team of Influenza disease burden-2019-till date WHO, HQ as well as chairperson for ME'NA-ISN association.*

Welcome to the 2024 edition of the ME'NA-ISN bulletin. It is with great pleasure and enthusiasm that I extend a warm welcome to you, our esteemed members and partners, as we embark on another year of collaboration and progress in our collective fight against influenza.

Since our inception on November 25, 2019, the Middle East, Eurasia, and Africa Influenza Stakeholders Network (ME'NA-ISN) has experienced remarkable growth and success. What began as a visionary idea to unite scientists and leading regional experts in the field of influenza has evolved into a dynamic association that embodies a multidisciplinary approach to addressing the challenges posed by influenza outbreaks.

As we look to the future, our mission remains steadfast: to deepen our understanding of influenza epidemiology, assess its burden on communities, and enhance vaccination practices tailored to the unique needs of our region. In doing so, we strive to lay the groundwork for evidence-based policies and interventions that can effectively mitigate the impact of influenza outbreaks on public health.

However, none of this would be possible without your unwavering support and contributions. Your expertise, passion, and dedication are the driving forces behind our continued success. Together, we have the opportunity to make a tangible difference in the lives of millions of people across the MENA region.

As we embark on this journey together, I invite you to actively engage with ME'NA-ISN, whether by proposing research projects, organizing scientific events, or advocating for policy change. Your involvement is not only welcomed but essential to our collective efforts to create a world resilient to pandemic influenza.

In closing, I extend my sincere gratitude to each and every one of you for your commitment to our cause. Together, let us forge ahead with renewed vigor and determination, united in our shared mission to strengthen influenza preparedness and protect the health and well-being of our communities.

Thank you, and I look forward to our continued collaboration and success.

Warm Regards,

**Dr. Salah Al Awaidy**  
Chair [ME'NA-ISN]

## Message From the Editor



*Dr Hyder Mir is a Post-Doctoral Scientist in Di Paola Lab at Washington University, St Louis, USA. Earlier he was working as Research Scientist and laboratory Head of Influenza Lab at Sheri Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences. Dr. Hyder has an M-Tech and Ph.D. in Biotechnology and 10 years of expertise in Virology and Molecular Biology. His research area mainly focuses on epidemiological surveillance of Influenza and other respiratory viruses and vaccine effectiveness of flu vaccine. He also studies the biology and genetics of telomeres in relation to COPD. In addition to reviewing for many international journals, he has authored/co-authored more than 27 peer-reviewed articles with an RG score of 25. He has presented his work in various international conferences including Latvia and China and has been awarded the ESWI Young Scientist Award twice (2017 and 2021). He is a member of the Asia Pacific Alliance for Control of Influenza (APACI) and the first international scientist to receive the ME'NA-IsN Research Award 2021.*

Dear colleagues;

I am excited to share the 6th edition of the ME'NA-IsN bulletin with you! This issue marks another step in our ongoing journey to enhance scientific excellence and strengthen our collective efforts in influenza prevention and preparedness across the Middle East, Eurasia, and Africa.

We are already preparing for Influenza Day 2024, which will be an in-person event on November 2nd in Istanbul focused on Navigating the Realm of Respiratory Infections. This event will provide an exciting opportunity to meet, share insights, and strengthen our collaborative efforts against influenza.

Don't miss the "Talks from the ME'NA-IsN" section, featuring an article by our governing board member, Dr Zakir Hussain, on The Influenza Epidemic in South Asia: Current Situations and Obstacles. You'll also find updates on our project and valuable resources to help combat influenza.

As always, our goal is to keep you informed and equipped with the latest developments in influenza prevention and response in our region. On behalf of the editorial board, I hope you find this bulletin both informative and inspiring.

Warm regards,

**The Editorial Team**

## INFLUENZA DAY 2024

The global health community is preparing for a landmark event this autumn: the ME'NA-ISN Influenza Conference, set to take place on November 2, 2024. Under the compelling theme “Navigating the Realms of Respiratory Infections: Insights into Challenges and Innovations,” this conference promises to be a crucial gathering for experts, researchers, and healthcare professionals dedicated to combating respiratory infections.



### A Critical Gathering for a Global Health Concern

Respiratory infections, particularly influenza, continue to pose significant challenges to public health systems worldwide. The annual ME'NA-ISN Influenza Conference has long been a pivotal forum for addressing these challenges through collaborative efforts and knowledge sharing. This year, the conference aims to delve deeper into the complexities of respiratory infections, exploring cutting-edge innovations and strategies to manage and mitigate their impact.

### Distinguished Speakers and Panelists

The conference will feature a lineup of distinguished speakers and panelists, including leading researchers, clinicians, and policymakers from around the globe. Their expertise and insights will provide attendees with a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of respiratory infections and the latest advancements in the field.

### Opportunities for Collaboration and Networking

In addition to the rich scientific program, the conference will offer numerous opportunities for networking and collaboration. Attendees will have the chance to connect with peers, exchange ideas, and forge partnerships that can lead to new research initiatives and improved public health outcomes.

### Why Attend?

For anyone involved in the field of infectious diseases, the ME'NA-ISN Influenza Conference is an essential event. It is a unique opportunity to stay abreast of the latest developments, share knowledge and experiences, and contribute to the global effort to combat respiratory infections. Whether you are a researcher, healthcare professional, policymaker, or industry representative, the insights gained from this conference will be invaluable in your work.

### Join Us in November

Mark your calendars for November 2, 2024, and prepare to join us for an enlightening and inspiring event. Together, we can navigate the realms of respiratory infections and drive forward the innovations that will protect and improve public health worldwide.

Stay tuned for more updates on the conference program and registration details. We look forward to welcoming you to the ME'NA-ISN Influenza Conference 2024!

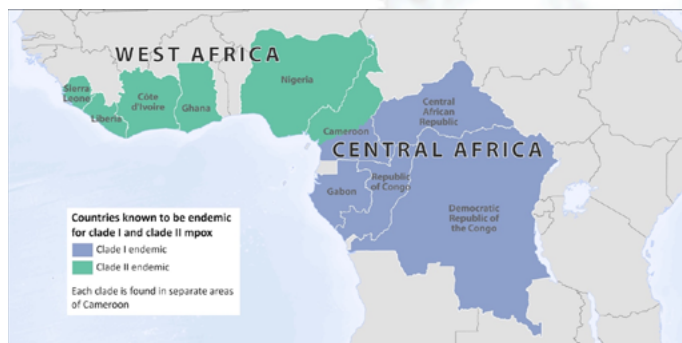
## News and social media

### Monkey Pox (Mpox)

Mpox (formerly known as monkeypox) is a disease caused by infection with a virus, known as Monkeypox virus. This virus is part of the same family as the virus that causes smallpox. People with mpox often get a rash, along with other symptoms. The rash will go through several stages, including scabs, before healing. Mpox is not related to chickenpox.

Mpox is a zoonotic disease, meaning it can be spread between animals and people. It is endemic, or found regularly, in parts of Central and West Africa. The virus that causes mpox has been found in small rodents, monkeys, and other mammals that live in these areas.

#### Virus Types



There are two types of Monkeypox virus: clade I and clade II.

- Clade I causes more severe illness and deaths. Clade I is endemic to Central Africa.
- Clade II is the type that caused the global outbreak that began in 2022. Infections from clade II mpox are less severe. More than 99.9% of people survive. Clade II is endemic to West Africa.

Read more: <https://www.cdc.gov/poxvirus/mpox/about/index.html>

### Mpox Vaccine

Vaccination is an important tool in preventing the spread of mpox. The vaccine may still protect against severe illness, hospitalization, and death. Get vaccinated with both doses of the vaccine for the best protection.

Read more: <https://www.cdc.gov/poxvirus/mpox/vaccines/index.html>

## CDC's Enhanced Summer 2024 Influenza Surveillance Strategy

In response to the ongoing avian influenza A(H5N1) outbreak and the upcoming agricultural fair season, the CDC has developed an enhanced surveillance strategy for summer 2024. This strategy, created in collaboration with state, tribal, local, and territorial (STLT) public health agencies, aims to monitor seasonal influenza and novel influenza A virus infections to inform public health actions.

The activities include monitoring symptoms among individuals exposed to H5N1-infected animals, educating agricultural fair participants about influenza risks, and encouraging influenza testing for individuals with relevant exposures and symptoms. The strategy also focuses on enhancing the detection of novel influenza A among severely ill patients and in the community, investigating unexplained clusters of respiratory illness, monitoring surveillance data for unexpected patterns, and detecting and investigating local data anomalies. These efforts aim to identify and prevent the spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) A/H5 among humans, starting with those in close contact with infected animals.

Read more: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu/strategy-enhanced-surveillance.htm>

## News and social media

### Information on Bird Flu

Avian influenza, commonly known as bird flu, is a disease caused by infection with Type A avian (bird) influenza viruses. These viruses naturally spread among wild aquatic birds worldwide and have the potential to infect domestic poultry as well as other bird and animal species. While bird flu viruses typically do not infect humans, there have been occasional instances of human infection.

Currently, the H5 bird flu strain is prevalent in wild birds globally and is causing significant outbreaks in U.S. poultry and dairy cows. There have also been recent human cases reported among U.S. dairy workers. For the latest information, data, and guidance on the current situation, please refer to the provided resources.

More details: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu/avian-flu-summary.htm>



### WHO Announces Recommendations for 2024-2025 Influenza Vaccines

The World Health Organization (WHO) has just unveiled its recommendations for the viral composition of influenza vaccines for the upcoming 2024-2025 influenza season in the northern hemisphere. This crucial announcement followed a comprehensive four-day meeting focused on determining the Composition of Influenza Virus Vaccines. Held twice a year, these meetings play a pivotal role in shaping the global response to influenza outbreaks. Experts from WHO Collaborating Centres and WHO Essential Regulatory Laboratories gather to analyze influenza virus surveillance data provided by the WHO Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS). Their findings and insights form the basis of the recommendations issued by WHO. The recommendations put forth by WHO are not merely suggestions; they serve as the cornerstone for national vaccine regulatory agencies and pharmaceutical companies worldwide. These entities rely on WHO's guidance to develop, produce, and license influenza vaccines for the upcoming season. This collaborative effort ensures that vaccines are tailored to address the specific strains of influenza expected to circulate. The periodic update of influenza vaccine compositions is essential to their effectiveness. Influenza viruses are notorious for their ability to rapidly mutate and evolve, making it imperative to stay one step ahead in vaccine development. By incorporating the latest surveillance data and scientific insights, WHO helps to ensure that influenza vaccines remain effective in combating the ever-changing landscape of influenza viruses. As we navigate the complexities of influenza prevention and control, the guidance provided by WHO serves as a beacon of hope. By fostering collaboration, facilitating data-driven decision-making, and promoting innovation, WHO continues to play a vital role in safeguarding global public health.

More details: <https://www.who.int/news/item/23-02-2024-recommendations-announced-for-influenza-vaccine-composition-for-the-2024-2025-northern-hemisphere-influenza-season>

## Influenza Surveillance Tools

### Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS)

Since 1952, the World Health Organization (WHO) has overseen global influenza surveillance via its Global Influenza Surveillance and Response System (GISRS).

GISRS has been a cornerstone of global health for over fifty years, fostering trust and cooperation through the sharing of viruses, data, and benefits among Member States. This collaborative effort is rooted in a commitment to a global public health model.

The mission of GISRS is multifaceted, serving as a global mechanism for surveillance, preparedness, and response to seasonal, pandemic, and zoonotic influenza. It also acts as a platform for monitoring influenza epidemiology and disease, while providing early warning for novel influenza viruses and other respiratory pathogens.

Currently, GISRS comprises institutions spanning 129 WHO Member States.

More details: <https://www.who.int/initiatives/global-influenza-surveillance-and-response-system>



### FluNet

FluNet, introduced in 1997, is an essential global web-based tool for influenza virological surveillance. It serves as a repository for virological data, including the number of influenza viruses detected by subtype. These data are instrumental in tracking the global movement of viruses and interpreting epidemiological trends. FluNet provides publicly available, regularly updated country-level data presented in various formats such as tables, maps, and graphs for comprehensive analysis and interpretation.

More details: <https://www.who.int/tools/flunet>



## The Influenza Epidemic in South Asia: Current Situations and Obstacles

South Asia, a densely populated region comprising countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives, continues to face significant public health challenges posed by the influenza virus. The region's diverse population, varying healthcare infrastructure, and socio-economic disparities contribute to the unique obstacles it encounters in managing and mitigating the impact of influenza.

As of 2024, the South Asian region is experiencing a season of influenza activity ranging from moderate to high, with the emergence of various strains of the influenza virus, predominantly Influenza A (H1N1 and H3N2) and Influenza B. The resumption of regular activities after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and the waning immunity among populations are partially responsible for this surge in cases. India, the most populous nation in the region, has observed a higher incidence of Influenza A (H3N2) strains, according to surveillance data. Hospitals, particularly in urban areas, have seen a noticeable increase in the number of patients admitted due to severe respiratory infections, with influenza being a significant contributor.

To mitigate the spread, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) has stepped up vaccine campaigns and surveillance efforts. Although Pakistan has made progress in influenza surveillance, the country still faces challenges in addressing the epidemic. Large, densely populated countries, weak healthcare systems, high poverty rates, and inadequate access to water, sanitation, and living spaces for effective physical distancing exacerbate the South Asian region's susceptibility to the influenza virus. The recent COVID-19 pandemic in the region has further compounded these socioeconomic disparities and structural inequalities, disrupting healthcare services and eroding population immunity to other respiratory illnesses like influenza.

To effectively manage the influenza epidemic in South Asia, a multifaceted approach is required. Strengthening disease surveillance systems and enhancing laboratory capacity for influenza virus detection are crucial first steps. Increased investment in healthcare infrastructure, particularly in underserved rural areas, can improve access to diagnostic testing and treatment for influenza. Promoting public health education campaigns to raise awareness about influenza prevention and vaccination can also play a vital role in mitigating the virus's spread. Coordinating regional and international collaborations to share best practices, distribute resources, and conduct joint research on influenza can further bolster the region's capacity to address this public health challenge.

It is also critical to address the social and economic determinants of health that exacerbate influenza vulnerability in South Asia. Improving living conditions, access to clean water and sanitation, and reducing poverty can enhance the population's resilience to infectious diseases like influenza. Integrating influenza prevention and control strategies into broader universal health coverage initiatives can ensure more equitable access to healthcare services and strengthen the region's overall preparedness.

Additionally, fostering interdisciplinary research collaborations can yield important insights into epidemiology, transmission dynamics, and effective interventions for influenza in the South Asian context. Leveraging digital technologies and innovative surveillance approaches, such as the use of Google search data, can complement traditional disease monitoring efforts and improve the region's ability to predict and respond to influenza outbreaks.

In conclusion, the influenza epidemic in South Asia poses a significant public health challenge that requires a comprehensive and coordinated response. Strengthening disease surveillance, investing in healthcare infrastructure, addressing socioeconomic determinants of health, and promoting regional and international collaboration are crucial steps towards mitigating the impact of influenza in this densely populated and diverse region.



### By Dr. Zakir Hussain

Dr. Zakir Hussain is a medical doctor and public health specialist with over 21 years of experience. He holds postgraduate qualifications in Public Health and Field Epidemiology and has completed fellowships in One Health and Global Health from Duke University and the University of Washington, respectively. Currently, he serves as the Country Director for the Pakistan Office of GHD/EMPHNET. Dr. Farooq's expertise includes infectious disease control, public health surveillance, and health system management. He is an active member of various global health networks and has numerous publications and presentations in international conferences.

## ME'NA-ISN PROJECT

### Annual Influenza Vaccination and Healthcare Worker Engagement: Insights from the VACCIMENA-HCP Study

Annual vaccination remains the most effective strategy to mitigate the health and economic impacts of seasonal influenza. Healthcare workers (HCWs) are pivotal in promoting vaccine uptake and advocating for immunization among their patients.

The VACCIMENA-HCP study investigates the factors influencing vaccine acceptance and advocacy among HCWs across the Middle East, Eurasia, and Africa. Launched in December 2022, the study included HCWs from 10 countries: Azerbaijan, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Türkiye. Participants were recruited through opportunity sampling, with a minimum target of 250 HCWs per professional category—medical practitioners, nurses, and pharmacists.

Between December 20, 2022, and March 1, 2023, 872 HCWs completed the survey, either online or on paper. The findings from this study will provide valuable baseline data to inform and enhance influenza vaccination policies in these regions, aiming to foster behavior change and improve vaccine uptake among HCWs.

## Welcoming Visionary Leaders: Get to Know Our New Governing Board Members!



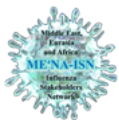
**Dr. Imane Jroundi**

Dr. Imane Jroundi is a full professor of public health and community medicine. She established and leads the social accountability program applied to public health at the faculty of Medicine and pharmacy of Rabat, Morocco since March 2020. Imane is a highly accomplished physician, has an extensive expertise in public health and infectious disease epidemiology. After a solid academic training, including a doctorate in international health and a master's degree in health public oriented towards applied research, Imane has demonstrated her commitment to advancing public health and global health as a post-doctoral fellow then as an associated researcher with prestigious research centers in Canada (the University of Montreal, Sainte Justine hospital center) and in Spain (the Carlos III Institute, Madrid) on the study of pediatric diseases targets for vaccination and the evaluation of public health policies, which were the subject of 30 publications indexed in Medline with a high impact factor. In parallel, she campaigns for better integration of ethics training into the curriculum of medical studies, as a fundamental program of social responsibility of the faculties of medicine by developing curricula, leading workshops and organizing debates as well both in Morocco and in Germany (the Institute of Bioethics, History of Medicine and Humanities of Giessen).



**Dr. AbdulAzeez A.  
Anjorin**

Dr. AbdulAzeez A. Anjorin is a Medical Virologist and certified health professional for infectious diseases. He is an elected Governing Board member of the Middle East, Eurasia & Africa- Influenza Stakeholders Network (ME'NA- ISN) and the Coordinator/ Principal Investigator for African Infectious Disease Multidisciplinary Research and Grant (AFIDMURG). He currently serves as the Head of Department of Microbiology and the Team Leader for Influenza & Other Respiratory Tract Viruses (IORTV) research at the Lagos State University, Nigeria. He was recently nominated and appointed as a member, Training and Career Development Committee of the World Society for Virology <https://ws-virology.org/aboutus/training-and-career-development-committee/> (2024- date). He received the Global Virus Network (GVN) training scholarship for Emerging Leaders in Virology at the Institute of Human Virology, University of Maryland School of Medicine; Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore; and National Institutes of Health (NIH), Bethesda, USA. He was also trained at the Bacterial and Viral Bioinformatics Resource Center (BV-BRC), Argonne National Laboratory, University of Chicago, Lemont, Illinois. Dr. AbdulAzeez had a training fellowship at the Luxembourg Institute of Health WHO influenza reference Laboratory. He received his Doctoral degree in Medical Microbiology with specialization in Virology from the College of Medicine/ School of Postgraduate studies, University of Lagos. He was also trained at the International Society for Influenza and Other Respiratory Viruses (ISIRV)/ Christian Medical College (CMC) Respiratory Virus School in Vellore, India; and received the INGS Africa Science Advice Skills Development Program Training Fellowship.



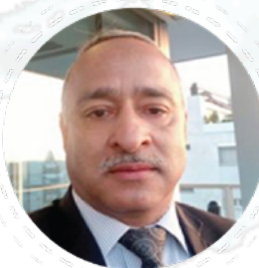
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**YOU ARE VERY WELCOME TO CONTRIBUTE  
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