

64th Session of WHO Regional Committee for Europe

Technical briefing on women's health

Speech of dr. Serena Battilomo (Ministry of Health of Italy)

Since 1995 in many international development strategies and documents, women's health has been a central theme to debate also in the cultural, civil and professional discussion. In this regard, I would like to recall the IV conference of the UN in Beijing, the many resolutions of the European Union and the documents produced by the WHO.

Women's health is a special topic for the Italian Minister of health (maybe because she is a young woman). She is convinced that to protect women's health means to protect the health of an entire family.

Policies for promoting the health of women across their lifespan represent actions aimed at improving the health of the entire population and it is a measure for the quality, effectiveness and fairness of a public health system.

Everyone agrees on the importance of the role of women within the family as strategic actresses in the implementation of healthy lifestyles and their role to prevent and cure diseases.

The woman, a true caregiver within the family, however does not receive much attention to her own state of health. This is the reason why she needs an active offer, at every stage of life, of specific preventive measures.

This is the reason why women's health has been chosen as a topic for the Italian Presidency of the Council of the European Union and on next 2-3 October the Ministerial Conference on "Women's health: a life-course approach" will take place in Rome.

This event will be an opportunity to discuss, compare and share experiences on this issue among the 28 Member States in order to improve prevention, diagnosis and treatment strategies for women at the different stages of life: from adolescence to senescence, throughout the childbearing years and menopause.

According to the principle of "promoting health in all policies", during the Conference debates we will focus on four main topics concerning women's health: lifestyles, sexual health, reproductive health and female cancer.

In fact, these topics play a fundamental role in terms of actions for the promotion of women's health and primary and secondary prevention of adverse outcomes.

Each session will be introduced by an opening keynote speaker on the topic's state of the art within the EU framework. The session will continue with two in-depth speeches, to focus on some relevant aspects of each of the four topics. A guided discussion will follow with scheduled brief interventions of Ministers or their delegates/representatives on the implementation of policies in their own Country.

It is our will to entrust these representatives to disseminate the Conclusion of the Conference in all EU on the improvement and support of shared strategies in the field of women's health.

The First Session will be dedicated to lifestyles, with in-depth speeches on "Physical activity during different stages of a woman's life" and "Diet and nutrition for women during different stages of life".

Nowadays incorrect lifestyles with insufficient physical activity and unbalanced diets often have a negative impact on the health of the population.

Correct nutrition and good health simply go hand in hand. A proper diet, balanced and varied, along with the daily practice of physical activity are basic elements for healthy lifestyles. This is a valuable tool for the prevention of some diseases, but also to cope with and treat others; it allows you to age better; it helps to maintain a proper body weight.

Wrong eating habits, both in quantity and quality, can cause the onset of chronic diseases such as obesity and overweight, high blood pressure, cardiovascular diseases, metabolic diseases, type 2 diabetes, some cancers, etc..

Furthermore, it is now widely accepted that physical activity in childhood and adolescence helps to achieve optimal peak bone mass and this is essential in the prevention of osteoporosis in menopause.

In the Second Session sexual health will be prioritized, in the context of health care systems, the education of young people on issues of sexuality, reproduction, and the promotion of life skills, positive attitudes and values such as the respect for oneself and for others, self-esteem, sense of responsibility that play an important role in the reduction of teenage pregnancy; in the prevention of voluntary interruption of pregnancy; in the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV. Sexual health is one of the five essential aspects of the Global Strategy for Reproductive Health approved by the General Assembly of the WHO in 2004.

The first in-depth speech is on "Sexually transmitted infections" as a widespread phenomenon and often without symptoms, and this increases the likelihood of infection of other healthy individuals and chronic affection, with possible consequences on reproductive function (infertility) and with a high risk of vertical transmission during pregnancy and / or childbirth. Several research highlighted the lack of awareness among young people towards the MST with the exception of HIV / AIDS. Moreover, often good knowledge does not translate into appropriate behavior.

The second in-depth speech is on "Endometriosis and sexual pain", a disease which is difficult to diagnose sometimes with an impact on reproductive health and infertility of couples

The Third Session will address the issue of reproductive health deepening on the primary prevention of birth defects and other adverse outcomes of reproduction.

In particular, we will discuss both preconception health and pregnancy, childbirth, the postnatal period with a focus on the promotion and improvement of the quality, safety and appropriateness of welfare interventions in the birth path. Planned interventions on mortality and severe maternal morbidity will be dealt with during the guided discussion - such as core indicators PERISTAT - as well as natural childbirth and birth humanization of the event even through the improvement of obstetric and pediatric-neonatal.

In the last part of the afternoon we will deal with the prevention of female cancers, a subject on which the screening campaigns are achieving excellent results in public health. In Italy the prevention of cervical cancer through Pap smear, the prevention of breast cancer through mammography screening and prevention of colorectal cancer, are among the services that are considered essential levels of assistance. Given the wide adherence to screening programs we want to focus on the possibility to capture the screening as an opportunity to promote women's health through specific activities of counseling. The last in-depth speech will focus on the theme of fertility preservation in young cancer patients, intervention to protect women and their biological function but also an additional reason for women in the battle against cancer.