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Across the globe, one person in every three (about 2 billion people) lacks access to essential medicines. Millions die every year from HIV and AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, pneumonia, measles, diarrhoea, heart disease and strokes – yet medicines exist for nearly all of these problems.

Medicines Transparency Alliance (MeTA) is a unique collaboration between governments, the private sector and civil society in seven countries around the world. It aims to improve access and affordability of medicines for people, often the poorest, who are unable to access essential medicines due to high cost or local unavailability.

Medicines Transparency Alliance Newsletter No.9 March 2010

Brian Elliott, Executive Director

As most of you will know, the Medicines Transparency Alliance is fast approaching its second birthday – and, like any birthday, we have reached a time for reflection and review.

We launched in May 2008 with high expectations and ambitious goals and in these two (short!) years, incredible progress has been made.

Seven countries – Ghana, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Peru, the Philippines, Uganda and Zambia – have brought together their governments, their businesses and their civil society sectors to collaborate to improve people's access to medicines. These countries have all committed to reform their health systems, improve stakeholder engagement, strengthen governance in the health sector and broaden transparency efforts. And each country is now starting to implement a plan of action that addresses their specific challenges.

These challenges are unique to each country and there is no doubt progress has occurred at different rates. What qualifies as 'success' also differs. Nonetheless, it is fair to say each country has its own success stories and some of these are highlighted in this newsletter.

One of MeTA's major achievements has been the creation of a new and open dialogue – which has led to far greater understanding and trust. Information sharing and understanding is crucial – which is why we are organising the MeTA Global Forum this summer. This will be an opportunity for participating countries to share their experiences and the lessons they have learnt, pass on advice and best practice and discuss future programmes and activities. Further details are outlined below. We hope to see many of you there.

The Flagship Course on Pharmaceutical Policy Reform held in Jordan in January offered another opportunity to share information and best practice. The course, which is outlined in more detail below, was rated extremely highly by >



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➤ the participants and they left with a clearer idea of their objectives and innovative ways of achieving them.

You may also know that the Medicines Transparency Alliance is undergoing an evaluation. We will know its outcome in the middle of May and are very hopeful that the value and work of this programme will be recognised. We are grateful to all of you who have been involved in this process – the evaluation team found your engagement very helpful and informative and they enjoyed hearing what was happening ‘on the ground’.

Finally, we would like to hear your news, views and comments. If there are issues or activities that you would like to see highlighted in these newsletters, then please let us know. In this edition we have also included a new item “Have your say”, where we are asking two crucial questions... we would love to hear from you!

Brian

News

Peru launches Price Observatory

In January of this year, the Peruvian government launched a Price Observatory for medicines. It is an online database which the general public can access through the internet, displaying medicine prices in different establishments. It is now being show-cased throughout Peru, so that the public can understand how to access and use this vital information.



The principle behind the creation of the Price Observatory is that greater transparency around the price of essential medicines will help to bring down the costs of these drugs and increase the consistency of pricing across the country.

This was identified as a priority by MeTA Peru in the very early stages of work planning and it has worked hard with all of its stakeholders to make the Price Observatory a reality.

Much of the Peruvian population live in poverty and most are unable to afford the medicines they need, in the quantities that they need them – and the money they do spend on medicines can be on drugs that are unfairly and unequally priced.

The creation of the Price Observatory is an important step. It will undoubtedly develop as a tool as both content and access to it grows, but the collaboration and commitment of the Government and the increased transparency around these essential medicines marks an important precedent for the country and for MeTA.

MeTA Zambia launches public awareness campaign



As part of its on-going campaign to raise public awareness of MeTA Zambia and its objectives, an impressive national communications drive has been launched.

The first of a weekly, hour-long radio programme was broadcast on 4 March 2010 and featured Violet Kabwe, the MeTA Zambia consultant. Further programmes will include interviews with many

more members of the MeTA forum – from the private and public sectors and civil society groups. Listeners will be able to understand the objectives and activities of MeTA Zambia from many perspectives. These

programmes will be re-broadcast on community radio stations so as to reach many more listeners and the activity is being teamed with television appearances and discussions.



“Feedback on the programme was very good. People said they were able to follow and understand the issues well and learnt a lot. Most importantly, they felt the Initiative is good.”

Violet Kabwe, MeTA Local Consultant, Zambia

Ghana – counterfeit drugs exposed



In recent months, counterfeit Coartem and Augmentin have both been identified by the Ghanaian Food and Drugs Board (FDB) and a World Health Organization-sponsored study identified 22 sub-standard anti-malarial medicines which have since been recalled by the FDB.

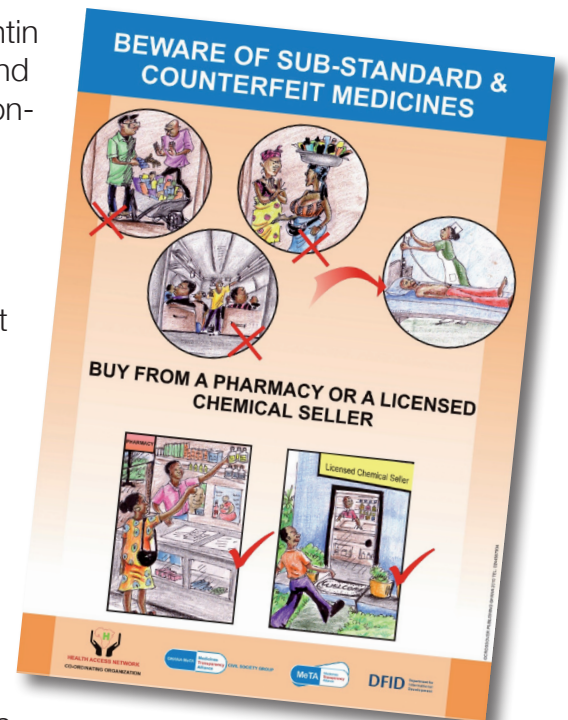
The quality of medicines in Ghana is a concern that has been raised by the Medicines Transparency Alliance and these recent discoveries mark an extremely important step in the on-going campaign to ensure that the Ghanaian population has access to effective, safe and good quality drugs.

As part of this campaign the Ghana MeTA Civil Society Group is launching a public awareness drive which is focused on consumer rights and protection. Publicity materials which highlight the issues around drug counterfeiting, patients' rights, health insurance and equitable/universal access to medicines will be posted in local healthcare and community facilities. Key groups in each community have been identified as crucial in spreading these messages – from market women to taxi drivers – and they will be specifically targeted. All of these activities aim to inform and educate the population so that they can make informed choices about the services and medicines they require and how they can best access them.

This is a challenging goal – there are many organizations working in the health field in Ghana – but MeTA is now focused on aligning these organisations so that their work is as co-ordinated and effective as possible.

“The World Health Organization is committed to supporting countries across the globe in their fight for access to quality medicines. Our work with the Medicines Transparency Alliance in Ghana and the other participating countries is vital in establishing, at country level, reliable methods and national expertise for collecting and analysing data on essential medicines. We play an important role in providing technical support and advocacy for this valuable initiative.”

Dr Gilles Forte, Coordinator,
Essential Medicines and Pharmaceutical Policy,
World Health Organization



Jordan – progress on increasing the volume of cheaper drugs for the public sector



Jordan has taken a number of important steps to tackle the problem of low availability and high cost of public sector drugs.

At present, only 28% of essential medicines are available to patients in public sector health centres. Most consumers have to buy their medicines from private sector pharmacies where the drugs can be up to 10 times more costly.

MeTA Jordan established that much of the problem stems from a lack of rational planning around these medicines. For example,

there are information gaps and logistical problems related to:

- ordering the right medicines at the right time,
- having adequate and appropriate storage facilities,
- tracking and tracing shipments.

As a result MeTA Jordan has been involved in national workshops, which have raised awareness of the issues and the potential solutions. It has also facilitated more targeted workshops on specific elements of the supply chain which have

highlighted clear options for improving logistics. In addition, it initiated an essential review of drug classification.

All of these steps have resulted in a far better understanding of the problems and, most importantly, the solutions.

They have led to the creation of new guidelines around the treatment of certain diseases and, crucially, they have established a positive dialogue with the Minister of Health who is now looking to MeTA for input and guidance on policy.

Review

Pharmaceutical Policy Reform – outcomes from the Flagship Course in Jordan, January 2010

The objective of this innovative 6 day course was to bring together a mix of representatives from each of the seven MeTA countries to discuss and develop the strategies to reform their national pharmaceutical policies.

The course was a collaboration between the Harvard School of Public Health, the World Bank and Medicines Transparency Alliance. It was carefully tailored to the requirements of the delegates and combined formal presentations with group activities and discussions. Country groups were presented with challenging case studies – based on real-life situations

and issues – for which they had to develop solutions and implementation strategies.

Delegates came from the private and public sectors and civil society groups in each country and it was evident that these diverse groups are fostering new ways of working together – a positive reflection of the MeTA process as a whole.

The delegations from each country came away with a greater understanding of their objectives and how to achieve them. The shared perspective allowed them to consider new and innovative ways of tackling the unique challenges they face.

“The Pharma Flagship Course was very exciting – the first ever “full size” event of this type. Participation level and audience response proved that the course was 100% on target. Another indicator for success is the interest expressed by some participants, or others that heard about the course, to repeat it in other parts of the world.”

Andreas Seiter, Senior Health Specialist – Pharmaceuticals, The World Bank

Forthcoming events

Medicines Transparency Alliance will be involved in a number of key international events over the next few months, not least its own Global Forum.

The World Health Organization Assembly

17 – 22 May 2010

Geneva, Switzerland

At its 63rd session, the WHO Assembly will discuss a number of public health issues, including:

- implementation of the International Health Regulations (2005);
- monitoring of the achievement of the health-related Millennium Development Goals;
- strategies to reduce the harmful use of alcohol; and
- counterfeit medical products.

MeTA aims to engage representatives from its participating countries in these discussions so that they can broaden the understanding of the challenges they face and increase the support and collaboration needed to address them.

Further information can be found at:

<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/events/2010/wha63/en/>

The Global Health Council (GHC)

14 – 18 June 2010

Washington DC, USA

This is the landmark conference to mark the progress on global health goals amongst all sectors within the global health community. More than 2,500 practitioners, global health and world leaders, activists, multilateral organisations, the public and private sectors, members of academia, and researchers will meet to discuss global health's goals and metrics.

MeTA's participation in this important event will aim to provoke – and advance – the debate on the issues of transparency and accountability and their impact on the supply of essential medicines in developing countries. More details will follow.

Further information on the GHC can be found at:

http://www.globalhealth.org/conference_2010/

The Global MeTA Forum

28 June – 2 July 2010

London, UK

The International MeTA Secretariat is planning a 5 day programme of international events to share the key lessons learned from the MeTA pilot phase and to provide an opportunity to outline future work. This will include a public meeting on 1 July 2010.

For further details, please contact the International Secretariat by writing to: admin@metasecretariat.org

Country events

There is also a lot of activity in our participating countries:

End March 2010

Zambia: Community awareness road shows

26-27 March 2010

Jordan: Civil society capacity strengthening workshop on pricing, promotion and communication

9 April 2010

Ghana: Launch and communication of the Ghana Medicines Transparency Alliance CSO Group

15-17 April 2010

Kyrgyzstan: MeTA National Forum



Have your say...

As part of our drive to share information and become as effective as we can, we are posing two rather 'big' questions in this edition of the newsletter. Your answers can be as general or as specific as you want – but we want to hear from you!

- **What is the greatest challenge facing the Medicines Transparency Alliance in your country?**
- **What has been the greatest achievement to date by the Medicines Transparency Alliance in your country?**

Please let us have your thoughts at: MeTALearning@dgroups.org.

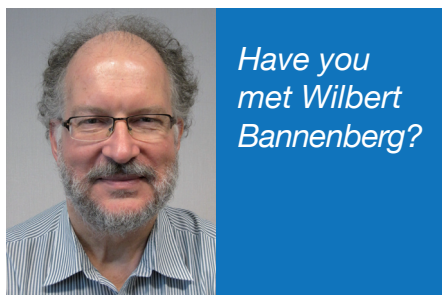
Did you know?...

Did you know that you can access the MeTA Communications Toolkit. This Toolkit is made up of a series of concise documents which offer practical advice and guidance on all your communications tasks – from drafting a press release and talking to journalists to conducting interviews and organising a press conference.

It can be accessed at: <http://www.medicinestransparency.org/resources/meta-resources/meta-toolkits/communication-toolkit/>.

Hard copies of this Toolkit are also being produced. If you would like to receive one of these, please contact the International Secretariat at: admin@metasecretariat.org.

Have you met?...



Dr Wilbert Bannenberg is Technical Director of the Medicines Transparency Alliance.

Wilbert has been with the programme from its inception and he is responsible for supporting all of MeTA's seven pilot countries, working with a team of national and international consultants.

Wilbert qualified as a medical doctor in the Netherlands in 1982 and has over 25 years experience as a freelance public health consultant. He is the founder of E-drug, an email discussion group about essential medicines, which links and informs more than 8000 health professionals globally (www.essentialdrugs.org). He is also a partner and vice-president of the HERA group, a consultancy

company specialised in health economics, health reform and pharmaceutical issues (www.hera.eu).

As many of you will already know, Wilbert brings numerous skills to MeTA's work – not least his strong technical and analytical expertise. Over the years, he has built up an extensive network of support and contacts and has acquired the mediation and negotiation skills needed to make progress in the field of public health reform. He has also been extremely innovative in finding ways to improve the long-distance support offered to those trying to reform pharmaceutical systems in developing countries.

Wilbert is married with 2 daughters, and lives in Bergeijk, the Netherlands.

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Contact us

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