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**Middle East Consortium on Infectious Disease Surveillance (MECIDS)  
Interventional Field Epidemiology Course  
5-10 September, 2004**

Thirty-five Palestinian, Jordanian, and Israeli health professionals spent a week together learning how to monitor and respond to disease outbreaks. They were participants in the first Interventional Field Epidemiology Course (IFEC) held by the Middle East Consortium on Infectious Disease Surveillance (MECIDS). The goals of MECIDS are to improve the ability of nations in the Middle East to respond to disease outbreaks and to build confidence among them. MECIDS is a project of Search for Common Ground, funded by the Nuclear Threat Initiative.

All the course participants will have roles in the system that MECIDS is building to share data about foodborne disease outbreaks in the region. They included doctors, nurses, laboratory technicians and senior decision makers from all three nations' ministries of health, as well as staff from the Cooperative Monitoring Center @ Amman, which will serve as the project's data hub. For many, this course provided the first opportunity to work with their counterparts from the other countries. Not only do most international health courses organize themselves according to World Health Organization regions, which place Israel in a separate group from its neighbors, but the past three years of Israeli-Palestinian violence have stifled bilateral and regional cooperation.

The five-day professional curriculum of the course was administered by a representative of the European Programme on Intervention Epidemiology Training (EPIET). Its objectives were to provide each participant with the following:

- An understanding of how to plan, implement, and evaluate a surveillance system
- Knowledge of how to perform outbreak investigations
- An understanding of the use of epidemiological principles and studies in outbreak investigations, to include both basic epidemiology and case control and cohort studies
- A clear understanding of his or her current role in the larger framework of the MECIDS foodborne surveillance program

Each ministry of health sent six participants and two or three facilitators. These facilitators, working with the EPIET representative and a senior epidemiologist from the United States, presented lectures and guided participants through hands-on exercises designed to teach key concepts in epidemiology, such as disease surveillance, outbreak investigation, the use of laboratory tools for both surveillance and outbreak investigation, pandemic preparedness, and study design.

In addition, Search for Common Ground provided training in interpersonal communication and cooperative problem solving, which not only taught important workplace skills but also helped participants address the challenges of meeting people from opposing factions in the Middle East conflict.

Finally, senior public health officials from all three ministries joined the course for a day, conducting a strategic planning meeting for MECIDS and speaking with participants about how data would move through the foodborne disease surveillance system.

In the future, MECIDS will sponsor additional trainings and meetings in order to teach specific skills in depth and to maintain the ties among this cohort of Middle Eastern health professionals.

**In their own words:**

*Every country in the region has objectives and goals to improve health services in their country, to improve surveillance systems in their countries. This meeting has similar objectives: to improve services and avoid infectious diseases. We are implementing a common plan of action.*

*We can't ignore political realities. We can't ignore suffering in the region.*

--Senior Palestinian Ministry of Health Official (West Bank)

*There was wonderful, unexpected interaction between the three peoples. We wish that peace is coming. We wish for more collaboration to make life easier for all our people.*

--Palestinian Ministry of Health Official (Gaza)

*Epidemiology is the core of public health. The objective of training is to minimize bias, to speak the same language*

--Senior Jordanian Ministry of Health Official

*From a professional point of view, I enjoyed very much to meet people from the other side that enjoyed so much the subject I love: epidemiology. Things change in small steps. Maybe this is the first step for a better atmosphere.*

--Israeli Ministry of Health Official

*Personally, I knew professionals were the same everywhere, but it was important for me to see it with my own eyes. Now I know we have good people in the region.*

--Israeli Ministry of Health Official

*I think we as professionals can do more than politicians can do. I hope the politicians can learn from us.*

--Senior Jordanian Ministry of Health Official

*I am very happy to join you in this room sitting with each other. I hope to work with each other.*

--Jordanian Agriculture Specialist

*We as health workers have our mission: provide a secure and safe life for our people.*

--Jordanian Ministry of Health Official

*I don't think anyone in our country believed it could happen.*

--Israeli Epidemiology Researcher

*All of us are now one unit sharing our dream, sharing our food. I hope we will continue to listen and learn.*

--Jordanian Laboratory Director

*I am very glad to be among you. I have a good idea about epidemiology systems. I hope all countries can cooperate in this field.*

--Jordanian Laboratory Technician

*I could learn epidemiology by reading a book. To meet this group is amazing for me. I hope at the next meeting, our colleagues from Gaza could come with us, maybe from Gaza International Airport.*

--Israeli Laboratory Director

*We didn't just listen, but we also heard.*

--Palestinian Laboratory Director (Gaza)

*One image stays in my mind: When we were in that restaurant, the three flags were together on the same table, and the singer was really impressed. I hope the politicians will soon understand that.*

--Jordanian Physician