AUBMC physician contributes to new high impact WHO HIV guidelines

Dr. Elie Akl, associate professor of Medicine at AUBMC’s Department of Internal Medicine, and director of the Clinical Epidemiology Unit at the Clinical Research Institute acted as methodologist on the World Health Organization (WHO) expert panel that issued the new “Consolidated guidelines on the use of antiretroviral drugs for treating and preventing HIV infection”. The guidelines were launched on June 20, 2013 at the International AIDS Society Conferences in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The guidelines, which delivered recommendations for a public health approach to the treatment of HIV, called for offering antiretroviral therapy (ART) earlier in the disease process. Recent evidence indicates that earlier ART will help HIV patients lead longer, healthier lives and will significantly reduce the risk of transmitting the virus, pushing HIV into irreversible decline.

WHO is further encouraging countries to enhance the ways they deliver HIV services by linking them more closely with other health services, such as those for tuberculosis, maternal and child health, sexual and reproductive health, and treatment for drug dependence.

Dr. Akl, who helped the panel apply the GRADE – Grading of Recommendations Assessment Development and Evaluation – approach to the HIV guidelines, has been involved in the development of a number of other WHO guidelines, and clinical society guidelines in the US.

“These guidelines have been developed over the past 12 months following a very rigorous approach of identifying, and synthesizing the evidence, assessing its quality, and taking into consideration factors such as feasibility, equity and acceptability by the community,” said Akl. He added: “the process used a broad consultation process and targeted ministries and high-level policy-making bodies”.

“Launching the guidelines represents one step in an ongoing process of synthesizing and reviewing the evidence, setting global norms and standards, adapting and implementing the guidelines in countries, and monitoring and evaluating their uptake and impact at country level,” asserted Dr. Gottfried Hirnschall, director of the HIV/AIDS Department at WHO.

Implementing the guidelines’ recommendations is expected to avert an additional 3 million deaths and prevent 3.5 million more new HIV infections between now and 2025.

The full guidelines can be accessed at: http://www.who.int/hiv/pub/guidelines/arv2013/en/