

AUB Faculty of Health Sciences leads the Lancet Commission on Syria

12/6/2016



In a move that promises to be one of its largest global health undertakings, the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS) has launched the Lancet-AUB Commission on Syria in partnership with one of the world's oldest and most influential health and medical journals, The Lancet. A two-day kick-off meeting was held to define the scope of the newly launched commission and develop a work plan leading to a global report in March 2018.

The Syria Commission is charged with examining the regional impact and global meanings of the Syria crisis, developing recommendations to address the needs of those affected, and mobilizing a stronger international response. Through its work, the Commission will raise the profile of the crisis in global health.

Three co-chairs lead the Commission: Iman Nuwayhid, Professor and Dean of FHS; Jennifer Leaning, Professor and Director of the François-Xavier Bagnoud (FXB) Center for Health and Human Rights, Harvard School of Public Health; and Samer Jabbour, Associate Professor at FHS who also serves as commission convener. AUB faculty members have been involved in past as Lancet commissioners, researchers, and writers. This is the first time that AUB is leading and hosting a Lancet commission.

Commissioners on Syria include prominent and multidisciplinary thinkers, academics, researchers, and practitioners. In addition, the Commission holds consultations with leading figures from government, UN agencies, think tanks, international aid organizations, practitioners working in relief, and academia who advise the co-chairs on the priorities for the Commission.

The Commission is supported by several centers at AUB: Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), Knowledge to Policy Center (K2P), and Center for Systematic Reviews on Health Policy and Systems Research (SPARK), among others. The Commission also collaborates with global centers with expertise in specific issues of interest to the Commission, such as refugees and humanitarian aid.

“In terms of health and human rights the Syria crisis is now at the epicenter of global discussions,” said Jennifer Leaning. “Through applying a health lens to the Syria crisis, the Commission will advance global discussions about issues such as international law violations and reforming the global humanitarian aid regime. The FXB Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard is fully committed to this Commission and I feel honored to be part of it.”

Goal of global visibility

The Commission relies on network approach used by FHS which has been fine-tuned through many of its regional initiatives to conduct its work at the global level. In knowledge management, the Commission collaborates with K2P, SPARK, and the Syria Public Health Network, working collaboratively to support a Research and Documentation team that oversees the science.

The kick-off meeting in early December 2016 brought together commissioners, experts, partners, faculty, students, and The Lancet leadership to focus on defining the work scope, particularly with the large number of national, regional, and global issues related to the Syria crisis.

On the local level, issues were discussed such as the delivery of health care with limited resources. The depletion of health professionals were national topics, Syria-wide, that were shed light on. On the regional and transcontinental levels, discussions addressed issues such as the health needs of refugees and host communities in neighboring countries, as well as refugee movement across continents from the region. The lack of implementation of UN Security Council resolutions on the protection of health facilities was one of the issues covered in the discussions on the global level. These issues were the basis for thematic groups formed to initiate a data collection and research on various areas that will feed into the final report.

The Commission agreed at the launching meeting not to go by the 18-month process to issue a major report but rather create a schedule of outputs that will keep the Syria question globally visible. The first planned output is a forthcoming commentary in The Lancet announcing the commission and issuing a global call for evidence and engagement. A working group focusing on health professionals and the health workforce in crisis will publish its findings in The Lancet in March 2017. The Commissioners have their eyes on policy change and plan to raise some of the issues to the World Health Assembly and UN General Assembly in 2017.

“This commission is particularly significant as it is the first time that a global Lancet Commission focuses on a regional issue of global interest and the first time that a Lancet commission is led by an institution in this region,” Dean Iman Nuwayhid told us. “The Commission collaborates closely with the Strategic Health Initiatives and AUB centers, and it corresponds well to the Vision on Health, “Health 2025”, outlined by President Fadlo Khuri for AUB to serve as the regional and global reference institution for health through impactful research, engaged instructional models, and contextualized service.”

“The Lancet is happy to partner with AUB and particularly the Faculty of Health Sciences to lead this commission,” said Richard Horton, Editor-in-Chief of The Lancet. “AUB, a leading academic institution in this region, is well positioned in relation to this crisis; has the right leadership and a critical mass of researchers who are engaged in this crisis; and can draw on its large regional and global network of collaborators and partners.”