



May 11, 2020

To: Nurmuhamet Amannepesov, Minister of Health and Medical Industry of Turkmenistan
Hans Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe
Paulina Karwowska, WHO Representative and Head of Country Office
Elena Panova, UN Resident Coordinator in Turkmenistan

Regarding Turkmen Public's Access to Critical and Credible Public Health Information

Dear Health Professionals,

We understand that WHO will be sending a mission of experts to Turkmenistan in the near future to better understand the COVID-19 situation in the country. We welcome this decision and we hope that this opportunity will become a turning point in opening communication between Turkmenistan's Ministry of Health and the public.

Unfortunately, over the last four months both the government agencies and the UN have been absent on the Internet. A failure to engage with the public creates a fertile ground for misinformation, anti-science rhetoric, conspiracy theories concerning the origin of the virus, and COVID-19 prevention strategies and treatment. This affects each of us individually and as a society in profound ways.

We hope that the experts will be able to further WHO's mission and persuade all the stakeholders in Turkmenistan through science, evidence, and examples of good practice that it is of the utmost importance to open and sustain direct communication with the public.

In our letter to [the Ministry of Health](#) sent out in February 2020, we asked to open communication with the public through official channels, such as Ministry's website, social media, and by opening the hotline. We spelled out the public's questions and concerns we had already received in that letter. We shared the letter with WHO and the UN in Turkmenistan. The letter has not triggered any direct reaction from the Ministry.

One of the recommendations in the letter was to open a COVID-19 hotline. The Ministry of Health did create a 24/7 coronavirus hotline a month later. Unfortunately, this is not enough. We are recommending and offering the Ministry of Health help in starting and streamlining the processes that will be important confidence-building measure between the public and the authorities:

Develop and promote educational and informational COVID-19 content in Turkmen: We are not merely asking to acknowledge or deny the infection in the country. We are asking to provide regular information about the virus in the context of country and global developments. At present, the [ministry website](#) does not have any information on COVID-19. WHO Turkmenistan office does not have a website page in the Turkmen language.

Write a regular epidemiological report for the public that would include the current developments in the country, specific numbers concerning the number of COVID-19 infections or absence of infections, number of tested cases, diagnostic test availability, hospital capacity, preparedness of medical personnel, availability of protective equipment, quarantine measures and so on.

Collaborate on a preparedness plan: Establishing a preparedness plan for a variety of scenarios is essential. As is sharing this with the public. This plan could be further improved by utilizing the experience of groups like Saglyk and other civil society groups who are ready to offer assistance based on many years of engagement with the public online and offline in communicating public health messages. There are groups that have been working with vulnerable groups: elderly, people with disability and others who could provide important insights to preparation strategies.

We believe in cultivating constructive and meaningful collaboration with stakeholders. We are ready to provide assistance both to the Ministry and the UN.

Respectfully,

Saglyk team

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